

Lesson 10

Righteousness That Surpasses the Scribes and Pharisees - Part 5

Key Scripture Readings: Matthew 5:38-42

Summary

- The statement, “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,” predates the Sermon on the Mount. It is found in the Code of Hammurabi. This rule (sometimes called *lex talionis*) provided for even-handed justice. Justice must fit the crime, and it must be extended to every person equally.
- “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” is also found in the Law of Moses (Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:19-20; Deuteronomy 19:21). God wanted His people to avoid seeking personal revenge against evildoers (Leviticus 19:18). The execution of justice was to be reserved for those in positions of civil authority. The scribes and Pharisees had corrupted this portion of God’s law. What had been originally intended to deter Israel from seeking personal revenge had been turned into a license to that very thing.
- Jesus exposed this abuse of God’s Law. He taught that disciples had been called to live by a higher standard. They avoid retaliation and settling scores.
- If a disciple is slapped with someone’s backhand (hit on the right cheek), he doesn’t respond by slapping the person back (Matthew 5:39).
- In the New Testament times, most people were very poor. The average person would owe two tunics (inner and outer). If a disciple is being abused in the court system (being sued for the things he possessed to keep him warm in the winter), he is not to cause a ruckus (Matthew 5:40). He should avoid allowing possessions to hinder him from making peace.
- Personal vengeance should not even be taken against the corrupt Roman government (Matthew 5:41). Roman officials could force into service any person for the distance of one mile. This was commonly called “The Roman Mile.” Simon of Cyrene was forced to help Jesus bear His cross to Golgotha (Matthew 27:32). The disciple is willing to go above and beyond for His enemy. Like Jesus, he is ready to give his adversary grace and mercy even though he may not deserve it.
- Begging was a common practice in the first-century world. Instead of being selfish and greedy, the disciple gives (Matthew 5:42). While he doesn’t enable the lazy (2 Thessalonians 3:10), he is willing to be generous.
- In this entire section, Jesus urges His followers not to be concerned about themselves. While the world seeks revenge against those who harm and insult them, followers of Christ are always concerned about the well-being of others.

Study Questions

1. What was God's original intent for the language "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" found in the Law of Moses? How had the scribes and Pharisees corrupted that intent?
2. Why is it hard not to retaliate and seek personal vengeance when someone does us harm? How do we overcome that desire?
3. List an occasion when Jesus could have retaliated and sought personal vengeance? What did He choose to do instead?
4. Are all of Jesus' words in this section to be taken literal? Or, could He be using some exaggerated language to emphasize a point? If so, list some examples.
5. List some real-life situations where applying the Lord's teaching will be necessary.
6. Which of the four examples in Matthew 5:39-42 do you think is the hardest to apply the Lord's teaching? Why?
7. Is Jesus teaching here that it is wrong to defend yourself with lawful means? Explain.