

## **Barratt Ministries Challenge**

**Issue No. 30**

**Ye have heard ... An Eye For An Eye**

**Sermon on the Mount Series, Matthew 5:38**

*by Maurice Barratt*

“Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away.” (Matthew 5:38-42)

“Ye have heard ...” - but what have you heard? Have you heard a law that allows you to avenge, to take revenge, or to give as good as you get? Then you have heard wrong. God’s word comes from his pure heart, but too often we hear with impure ears.

Jesus is quoting from Exodus 21. If you read from verse 12 to the end of the chapter, you will find that there are many similar laws laid down, covering all manner of different situations - if a man is murdered, if a man steals another man and sells him, if someone curses his father or mother, if a man is injured by another in a fight; and so on. The immediate context of Jesus’ quote comes in verse 22, concerning what should happen if a pregnant woman is hurt during a fight between men, and she lose the baby: “And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, stripe for stripe.”

### **Justice**

These rules clearly state a principle. It’s summed up in a verse from later on in the law: “As he hath done, so shall it be done to him” (Leviticus 24:19). At first sight it might indeed seem to be a principle of revenge. But it is not about vengeance at all - it is about justice. That is an entirely different matter. It is just and right and fair that eye should go for eye, that the punishment should strictly and absolutely fit the crime. It’s perfect justice, perfect fairness.

It is also a deterrent. Those who oppose capital punishment often use the argument that capital punishment is not a deterrent. But whatever their statistics may say, God says in his law that “life for life” is a deterrent. In Deuteronomy we read that if a witness testifies falsely against another man, and the judges find out that his witness is false, “Then shall ye do unto him, as he had thought to have done unto his brother ... And those which remain shall hear, and fear, and shall henceforth commit no more any such evil among you. And thine eye shall not pity; but life shall go for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth...” (Deuteronomy 19:19-21). The same principle is quoted here as a principle of justice and a principle of deterrence.

This is not to do with vengeance, because vengeance belongs to God, not to man. This is as true in the Old Testament as in the New. "To me belongeth vengeance" (Deuteronomy 32:35). "Vengeance belongeth to me, I will recompence, saith the Lord" (Hebrews 10:30).

For us, revenge is a wrong motive. The Church must always ask God to avenge, we must never do it ourselves. Even in heaven the souls under the altar pray to God: "How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" (Revelation 6:10). They appeal to God's justice and righteousness ("holy and true").

When God's justice is administered on earth through men, as for example in the case of Joshua wiping out the Amorites, that was God's vengeance, not Joshua's. Joshua did not hold anything personally against the Amorites. He was just obeying God's command to destroy them. If we want to call that callous, we must call God callous, not Joshua. It is surely judgement and vengeance, but it is God's vengeance, not man's.

So we see that we must not jump to conclusions about what God's word says. We hear according to our hearts. This is why Jesus tells us to "Be careful how ye hear" (Luke 8:18), and it reinforces why he is at pains to contrast the truth of God's word, the spirit and heart of the law, with the letter of it and the misinterpretations put upon it by our selfish hearts, the things that "ye have heard".

Jesus now gives four examples. We know that these will show us the spirit of the law. They will show us what love would do. Love, says Paul, "seeketh not her own" (1 Corinthians 13:5). Vengeance does "seek her own". Revenge is what we would like. So Jesus shows us what our reactions should be - not what we would like, but what he would do. The four examples each concern our reaction to different sorts of abuse.

### **Physical Abuse**

"But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also."

This is suffering physical abuse. It raises a hornet's nest of questions. Can we defend ourselves as Christians? Would we not be within our rights to do as many Christian ministers do in America and carry guns, in order to defend ourselves, our wives, our children or property against attack? Should we go to war and kill other men for our country? The answer to all such questions is simple. Jesus has just given it. Not only should we not defend ourselves, or our country - we should turn the other cheek also.

Christianity has this peculiar distinction: it goes beyond the reasonable. We follow a God who went beyond the reasonable and sent Jesus to die for a rebellious world, fulfilling his justice by pouring out his wrath and judgement on his Son.

What is it that goes beyond the reasonable? It is love, the character of our Father who sent his Son because he "so loved the world". This is beyond us, even beyond our comprehension. We would never go this far. It is the character of Christ, not of us. In order to be like this, we need him. We will never ever do it. This is what all Christianity is about. It is not about being good, moral, religious

people. Good, moral people may “resist not evil”, but they will never “turn the other cheek”. Only a fool would do that - or a Christian. But how many of this sort of Christian is there around? George Bernard Shaw commented bitterly that he would gladly become a Christian if he’d ever seen one. Many people have an outward show of Christianity or the profession of it - but how many demonstrate the real thing?

Jesus is not advocating masochism. We are not to suffer physical abuse because there is something good in physical suffering. There is nothing good in it. When Paul was about to be scourged by the Romans, he asked, “Is it lawful for you to scourge a man that is a Roman, and uncondemned?” (Acts 22:25). He didn’t think it would be good to suffer a scourging. He claimed his right as a Roman citizen, and escaped the flogging. But when there was no choice, Paul accepted suffering and did not resist it; in fact, he rejoiced that he was able to share in “the fellowship of [Christ’s] sufferings” (Philippians 3:10).

### **Legal Abuse**

“And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also.” This is suffering legal abuse. Again, it’s not to be silly and “over the top”; it’s not to go round asking for trouble. It’s “if any man will sue thee at the law” - if you’re taken to court.

It’s also a serious abuse Jesus is talking about. Under the Old Testament law, if a poor man offered his coat to a moneylender as a pledge or surety, the moneylender had to return the coat to the man at night, because his coat was his blanket, his covering at night. Without it he could die of exposure. But Jesus tells us to suffer this wrong, and to go further, to “let him have thy cloke also”. To put it in modern terms, it is like if someone were to take you to court and sue you for your house, and you were to not only refuse to contest his claim but to offer him your car as well. It wouldn’t be reasonable - but Jesus tells us it would be Christian.

### **Civil Abuse**

“And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain.” We could call this suffering civil abuse. The word translated “compel” here is a rare word in the New Testament. It is a Persian word which denotes a legal term meaning “to press into public service”. Roman law allowed a soldier to commandeer any citizen at any time to do any task. This is what happened when Simon of Cyrene was “compelled” to carry Jesus’ cross. Simon wasn’t a saintly man doing a holy job. He was a conscript with no choice in the matter!

But once again Jesus demands that we go beyond the reasonable. It might be reasonable, good, moral, virtuous or religious to accept the forced labour with good grace. But to offer to go a second mile is crazy - or Christian. You see, only by going beyond the reasonable can we prove that we are real Christians, and not just good, moral, religious people. The Christianity is in the extra mile - and only in the extra mile. The first mile isn’t Christianity at all. Only the extra mile, the other cheek, the cloak as well as the coat, sets the Christian apart.

## Personal Abuse

“Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away.” This last example concerns suffering personal abuse. Once a man asked if he could borrow my ladders. I said yes, he was welcome. But he didn’t bring them back. Six months later I needed the ladders myself, and when I rang the man up to ask if he would bring them back, he said he didn’t have a vehicle any more. So I had to go and pick them up myself! And then, just two weeks later, he was on the phone again, asking if he could borrow them again!! What if they’d been stolen from him? According to Jesus, I should say “Never mind”, and buy some new ones, and then if he asked to borrow them again, lend them him again, and not ask for them back ...

To be a Christian is to keep saying yes, beyond what’s reasonable, as Jesus says in Luke’s gospel: “Give to every man that asketh of thee, and of him that taketh away thy goods ask them not again” (Luke 6:30). Isn’t that foolish? Well, actually, no, it isn’t at all, because of what Jesus says a few verses later: “If ye lend to them of whom ye hope to receive, what thank have ye? for sinners also lend to sinners, to receive as much again ... Lend, hoping for nothing again, and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind to the unthankful and the evil” (verses 34,35).

## God’s Repayment

Vengeance is God’s, and “he will repay” in every sense - evil for evil, as we have seen, but also good for good. Give to those who give back to you, and you have claimed your own “repayment”. But obey Jesus’ commands in the verses we are considering today, surrender your claim to “your rights”, die to self (because self is all about “my rights”), and God will repay you! Now, when we consider it this way, that’s not unreasonable. In fact, it’s the most sensible, wise, far-sighted decision a person could ever make.

## Experiences From Life

*by Joanna Barratt*

### **"But I Say ... Turn The Other Cheek!"**

I always used to look forward to Saturday evenings because this was when all the family would pack into Maurice's old Morris 1000 (ex GPO) van and drive to Maurice's parents' house for "Saturday Night Supper". It was a highlight of the week for me because it often meant getting into really deep fellowship around the Bible with Maurice's father who was quite an exceptional pastor with a wonderful personal relationship with God. This Saturday had been just as I had expected it to be and as we drove home we were continuing to share the thoughts that had been stimulated during the course of the evening.

We were about half a mile away from home when a police car, flashing his "stop" sign, overtook us, thus bringing us to a halt. Maurice wound down his window as the officer stode up to us and asked what the matter was. As soon as the policeman opened his mouth everyone in the car could smell the drink on his breath, and it was strong. The officer seemed out of sorts about something and his attitude was quite nasty, but Maurice held his tongue and answered all his questions as pleasantly as he could. The officer then went all round the van doing a quick inspection after which he got out his notebook and booked Maurice for having a "bald tyre" on the front of his vehicle. Although Maurice kept his temper cool, he was very angry because he knew very well that the tyre was not at all bald. He tried to reason with the officer but he had met him on a bad day and there was no talking sense to the man. He shoved the paper into Maurice's face and told him to present his driving licence at the station within the next 24 hours.

### **Conscience**

Now Maurice is normally a pretty cool customer, but at this point he was absolutely steaming. He dropped us off at home and then went straight round to the police station to lodge a complaint against the officer who had charged him. The policeman on the desk was not at all pleased with the accusation Maurice was making that one of his colleagues was drinking on the job and made the interview as unpleasant as possible. He left the desk on some pretext that he had to see someone or something and left Maurice roasting for what seemed like an age. During this time Maurice and his conscience had a little talk. What on earth was Maurice doing here? Wasn't he the very one who boasted to everyone that he supported the police? The man must have had a bad day, or been told some bad news, and what he did was obviously out of character, surely you had to make allowances for people. And wasn't he supposed to be a Christian? Doesn't the Sermon on the Mount teach us to rejoice when we are being falsely accused? What on earth are you doing here, Maurice?

### **Refusing Vengeance**

The battle was over. The police officer came back to the desk and Maurice sheepishly walked over to him saying that he would like to drop his complaint, he supported the police and didn't want to make trouble for anyone. The officer must have thought that something he had spitefully said had taken effect and he gloatingly grinned in a mocking way as Maurice left the station. He certainly looked as though he had his tail between his legs, but only Maurice knew in his heart that his action was due to meekness towards the commandments of God and not weakness towards the consequences of his complaint. So he just went home and awaited the Summons which he knew would shortly come. The Summons and date for the court case came. Maurice pleaded "guilty", which meant that he didn't need to appear in Court, sent off his driving licence, and waited to hear how much he had been fined for his crime. Weeks went by, months went by, but still he heard nothing - which was impossible! If his driving licence had not been received, a warrant for his arrest would have undoubtedly been the next step. But there was absolute silence. Months went by and nothing was heard. After a couple of years had gone by and still nothing was heard, Maurice needed to renew his licence. He filled in the appropriate forms and within a few weeks was sent a brand new driving licence ... absolutely clean of any endorsements, and the one he had sent off to the police

had already been sullied with a previous conviction! But it cemented firmly in Maurice's mind, and my mind, that God can take care of us if we allow Him to take control of the circumstances.

### **Defending Ourselves**

So many Christians who profess to be following the teachings and lifestyle of Christ are only too eager to take matters into their own hands and defend themselves, when the Bible teaches clearly that this is not what we are supposed to do. Only recently I heard about a famous American evangelist who sued another party for libel and won. He probably thought it was vindication, but when we seek to justify ourselves, we are in actual fact just fighting our own battles, and not allowing God to fashion and mould us using our circumstances. Some time ago an expectant Christian mother lost her baby, due, she said, to hospital neglect. She was so distraught that she sued the hospital and fought as hard as she could to win her case. Unfortunately, she was so full of bitterness and resentment, that in the process she lost her peace of mind and relationship with God, which was only restored to her when she dropped the case and made a conscious decision to forgive the doctors and nurses who had caused her so much damage.

### **"Vengeance Is Mine"**

"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, I will repay". Yet do we give Him the opportunity to fulfill His promise, or are we mad that He seems to take so long to get back at those who have hurt us? My morning readings just recently have been from Timothy where Paul is encouraging this young minister to "endure hardness as a good soldier", and goes on to remind Timothy of the example he himself has set in his doctrine, manner of life, and of the persecutions and afflictions he had endured, and goes on to state that "all who will live godly in Jesus Christ will suffer persecution". What a pity, this is a promise you don't usually find in the promise boxes! We've been led a dance really if what we expect from our Christianity is to be happy, prosperous and problem free. The reality is that we are expected to identify with the sufferings of Christ, who was sinless, yet was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, and falsely accused, but didn't seek revenge.