

Does Jesus teach pacifism in Matthew 5:38-40?

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The bible verses:

Matthew 5: 38-40

“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 anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well.

Context:

When you look at Matthew 5, this is the “Sermon on the Mount”.

Jesus was correcting(!) what people thought(!) what righteousness though the Old Testament laws in that passage.

Let’s start with verse 20 to explain it:

Matthew 5:20

For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.

The scribes and Pharisees abused the OT laws big time, and they were showing off how “great” they were with “following” those laws into the absurd and extreme. Verse 20 is in a passage that deals with The Fulfilment of the Law.

So, when people heard verse 20, that they needed to be even better than the scribes and Pharisees, they must have thought: wow! How can we even be better than them?

In Matthew 5, you see first that Jesus walks them through a big part of the ten commandments. (verse 21 and on), and people could reply with:

“Hey, I don’t murder, as the law says, so I’m OK!”

You see how Jesus does reply to that in verse 21 and 22:

[Matthew 5:21,22](#)

“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

And then He goes on about lust, human relations and a He gives them more examples like that.

So, Jesus says: you think that when you behave accordingly to the OT laws, you think you’re OK, but it goes WAY further than the OT laws. Way further!

And now people start to think... I need to be better than this? How, just how?

So, Jesus shows them, that nobody can live up to all of that (let alone how the scribes and Pharisees twisted it), and because of that we need a saviour!

Jesus is correcting them, how they thought the law did work. He told them, you thought that’s it, but its WAY more...

Jesus is fulfilling the Old Testament BIG time in Mathew 5...

[The Old Testament law said this:](#)

[Exodus 21:23-25](#)

But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

But... for who are laws made for?

[1 Timothy 1:8-9](#)

We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. We also know that the law is made **not** for the righteous **but for** lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers,

Laws are created to limit evil. (As we did see in another bible study), that law was not there to limit people who are not evil. The verse in Exodus was there so people could not use excessive force.

[Explanation:](#)

Compare that to Matthew 5: 38-40. Exodus 21:23-25 is destroyed by Jesus, as it is written in Matthew 5: 38-40, to say the least!

Jesus is saying: retaliation is NOT the first way to respond as you all thought that you could do with Exodus 21 in your hand, its not. If you are a Christian, there is a “new king in town”!

The law was there to limit human aggression, but the love of Christ implores us to excel even more!

He does not say I want you to be a pacifist and be abused, no, He is saying, I don't want you to run to your neighbour and do so as Exodus says, no, the heart of God, is to be kind.

So, what to do today?

We, as Christians, also live in earth, an earth that is not perfect, and God gives us government.

Romans 13 says that the God gives the government the right to bear the sword, so Christians can bear the sword as long as (!!) we are working in a governmental role. Our government decrees that we can protect ourselves, therefore we are an arm of the government.

So, we are not free to go to our neighbour and shoot him ourselves if we want to, no, we are to go to the government to judge. When our neighbour is threatening us, we are, by law, that the government gave us, allowed to protect ourselves in a way the government allowed us to do so.

1 Peter 2:14

or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.

That is why we NEED to pray for our government, that they follow God His rules:

1 Timothy 2:1-2

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.

Finally:

The bible does not teach that we should do nothing when people are abusive to us. (love, love, love) As human beings, our human reaction is: hit him back. But Jesus says: as best as your able, be in peace with everyone. So, your first step should not be retaliation, but should be peace-making. If that does not work, go to (for instance) Matthew 18 and use the rules that are there about church laws or follow what your government says.

Jesus tells us to go the extra mile for someone who abuses us (Matthew 5:41) and to love and pray for our enemies instead of holding enmity against them (verse 44)

Jesus' command to turn the other cheek is simply a command to forgo retaliation for personal offenses. He was not setting government foreign policy, and He was not throwing out the judicial system. Crimes can still be prosecuted, and wars can still be waged, but the follower of Christ need not defend his personal "rights" or avenge his honour.

Retaliation is what most people expect and how worldly people act. Turning the other cheek requires help from on high.

Should we just do what the government says, even when it is an evil government?

Christians should resist a government that commands or compels evil and should work non-violently within the laws of the land to change a government that permits evil. Civil disobedience is permitted when the government's laws or commands are in direct violation of God's laws and commands. If a Christian disobeys an evil government, unless he can flee from the government, he should accept that government's punishment for his actions, and Christians are certainly permitted to work to install new government leaders within the laws that have been established.

Biblical examples:

In Exodus 1, the Egyptian Pharaoh gave the clear command to two Hebrew midwives that they were to kill all male Jewish babies.

In Joshua 2, Rahab directly disobeyed a command from the king of Jericho to produce the Israelite spies who had entered the city to gain intelligence for battle.

The book of 1 Samuel records a command given by King Saul during a military campaign that no one could eat until Saul had won his battle with the Philistines. However, Saul's son Jonathan, who had not heard the order, ate honey to refresh himself from the hard battle the army had waged. When Saul found out about it, he ordered his son to die. However, the people resisted Saul and his command and saved Jonathan from being put to death.

Daniel records a number of civil disobedience examples. The first is found in chapter 3 where Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow down to the golden idol in disobedience to King Nebuchadnezzar's command. The second is in chapter 6 where Daniel defies King Darius' decree to not pray to anyone other than the king.

So, its ALWAYS God first.

The position the Scriptures uphold is one of biblical submission, with a Christian being allowed to act in civil disobedience to the government if it commands evil, such that it requires a Christian to act in a manner that is contrary to the clear teachings and requirements of God's Word.