

An answer to whether or not Christians should defend themselves.

Many Christians and non-believers both argue that the Bible sets forth the requirement to be a pacifist at all times. Therefore, they feel Christians learning self defense is wrong, and non-believers will call a Christian martial artist a hypocrite.

The entire argument revolves around one passage in the Bible that is from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount- Matthew 5:38,39

The King James translation of this verse is the one most often quoted and reads as follows:

³⁸Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: ³⁹But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.

Verse 39 is the crux of the issue as people will state that "ye resist not evil" is a command to absolute pacifism. They will go on to state that the command to turn the other cheek reinforces the first command.

If this is true, then it is wrong to be a Christian martial artist.

But what if you could be shown that this view is wrong? What if there is evidence to substantiate this statement? It is time to look at this with an open mind before making any decision on this topic.

The best way to approach this is to look at one section of this passage at a time. So let's start by taking a look at the section about resisting evil. We will then show why Jesus referred to an eye for an eye, and what the real meaning of turning the other cheek means.

Let's look at the passage dealing with resisting evil in the original Greek and offer possible English translations for each word.

Here is the Greek text using the English alphabet, with the possible translations below each word:

<i>ego</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>lego</i>	<i>humin</i>	<i>me</i>	<i>anthistemi</i>
(I, me)	(but, also)	(speak, utter)	(to- you, yourselves)	(not)	(stand against, resist)
<i>ho</i>	<i>poneros</i>	<i>alla</i>			
(the, that)	(evil, wicked)	(but-conjunction, contrariwise-adverb)			

All translations are straightforward until you reach the word *alla*, this word has two totally separate meanings depending on how it is used grammatically. The KJV uses it as a conjunction because that is the way it is used most often (but not always- a key point). In this case, if it is used as an adverb to modify resist, then contrariwise should be used. This can be seen by taking a look at Strong's Greek lexicon

From Strong's Greek:

00235:

235 *alla* al-lah' neuter plural of 243; properly, other things, i.e. (adverbially) **contrariwise (in many relations)**:--and, but (even), howbeit, indeed, nay, nevertheless, no, notwithstanding, save, therefore, yea, yet. see GREEK for 243

Ok, so what exactly does contrariwise mean? It is never heard in conversation any more. Since Strong's was written many years ago, the older the dictionary, the closer you'll get to the definition as understood in the Strong's lexicon

From the 19th century Webster's dictionary contrariwise is defined as:

Contrariwise /Con'tra-ri-wis/ (? or ?), adv. 1. On the contrary; oppositely; on the other hand. Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing; but contrariwise, blessing. 2. In a contrary order; conversely. Everything that acts upon the fluids must, at the same time, act upon the solids, and contrariwise

You may be thinking, this is all nice, but what does it have to do with pacifism vs. self defense? Take a look at the 2 translations below

This verse is usually translated as follows:

³⁹but I say to you, Do not resist evil. Whoever shall strike you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.

According to some scholars, a more correct translation would read:

³⁹But I say to you, Do not resist evil *with evil (or in a like manner)*. Whoever shall strike you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.

WOW, what a difference!!

Now let's see if this idea of evil for evil is expressed elsewhere in the Bible.

Romans 12:17:

Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men.

I Thessalonians 5:15:

See *that* none render evil for evil unto any man, but always follow that which is good, both among yourselves and towards all.

I Peter 3:9:

Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are there unto called, that ye should inherit a blessing.

There is a reason this is significant. The apostles clarified what Jesus said or gave greater detail to Jesus' teachings. They did NOT contradict the Saviour's teachings.

Before we look at other sources, let's take a look at one of the methods of teaching in the middle east. We often try to understand the writings in the Bible with western linear thinking, but the Hebrew pattern of thinking, learning, and teaching is vastly more similar to the patterns of teaching in the orient than in the west. Because of this thought process, there is most often a balance to the wording that is used. This is a cultural attitude and must be understood by those who interpret *teachings*. Understanding this would lead to giving more credence to the "but I say to you, do not resist evil with evil" interpretation as it provides a direct and balanced contrast to "you have heard it said, an eye for an eye". In this verse "You have heard it said", and "but I say to you" provide the direct contrast by basically saying, you have been taught incorrectly, but I am telling you the correct teaching. Likewise, the second part is balanced with *not evil for evil* contrasting *an eye for an eye*. I could spend pages going into the eastern methods of teaching, but I need to move on so we can continue with our investigation of this topic.

So now that you've seen the possible translations, let's go one step further. I don't expect you to take my word alone on this. After all, the Bible states that when something is to be substantiated, it requires 2 or more witnesses. Following that principle, I offer the following excerpts from several of the most respected commentaries on the Bible.

From Matthew Henry's Commentary

1. We must not be revengeful (v. 39); *I say unto you, that ye resist not evil*;--the evil person that is injurious to you. The resisting of any ill attempt upon us, is here as generally and expressly forbidden, as *the resisting of authority* is (Rom. xiii. 2); and yet this does not repeal the law of self-preservation, and the care we are to take of our families; we may *avoid evil*, and may *resist it*, so far as is necessary to our own security; but we must not *render evil for evil*, must not bear a grudge, nor avenge ourselves, nor study to be even with those that have treated us unkindly, but we must go beyond them by forgiving them

From Robertsons Word Pictures:

Matthew 5:39

The language of Jesus is bold and picturesque and is not to be pressed too literally. Paradoxes startle and make us think. We are expected to fill in the other side of the picture. One thing certainly is meant by Jesus and that is that personal revenge is taken out of our hands, and that applies to "lynch-law." Aggressive or offensive war by nations is also condemned, but not necessarily defensive war or defence against robbery and murder. Professional pacifism may be mere cowardice.

From Family Bible notes

Matthew 5:39:

Resist not evil; by rendering "like for like". It is the spirit of kindness and forgiveness towards those who injure us which our Lord here inculcates. The forgiveness of injuries, and not the avenging of them, is an exhibition of true greatness and goodness.

Adam Clarkes Commentary

Matthew 5:39:

Verse 39. *Resist not evil*] Or, *the evil person*. So, I am fully persuaded, *ἵνα πονηρῶ* ought to be translated. Our Lord's meaning is, "Do not repel one outrage by another." He that does so makes himself precisely what the other is, a *wicked person*.

The Fourfold Gospel and Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles

Matthew 5:39:

#Mt 5:39| **But I say unto you, Resist not him that is evil.** The *lex talionis*, or law of like for like, was the best possible rule in a rude state of society, its object being not to sacrifice the second eye, but to save both, by causing a man when in a passion to realize

that every injury which he inflicted upon his adversary he would in the end inflict upon himself. From this rule the scribes drew the false inference that revenge was proper, and that a man was entitled to exercise it. Thus a law intended to prevent revenge was so perverted that it was used as a warrant for it. This command which enjoins non-resistance, like most of the other precepts of this sermon, does not demand of us absolute, unqualified pacivity at all times and under all circumstances. In fact, we may say generally of the whole sermon on the mount that it is not a code for slaves, but an assertion of principles which are to be interpreted and applied by the children of freedom. We are to submit to evil for principle's sake and to accomplish spiritual victories, and not in an abject, servile spirit as blind followers of a harsh and exacting law. On the contrary, taking the principle, we judge when and how to apply it as best we can. Absolute non-resistance may so far encourage crime as to become a sin.

John Wesley's notes on the bible

Matthew 5:39

But I say unto you, that ye resist not the evil man . . . If a man smite thee on the right cheek - Return not evil for evil: yea, turn to him the other - Rather than revenge thyself.

People's New Testament Notes

Matthew 5:39:

Resist not evil. Jesus does not forbid the judicial application of the law, but personal revenge, such as was common among the Jews. Instead of turning upon those who injure us, and becoming a party to personal broils, it is the duty of Christians to suffer meekly.

Not resisting evil (or evildoers, depending on the translation) would preclude defending yourself. Not resisting evil "with evil" or "in a like manner" then opens up the fact that resisting evil with a correct motivation is ok. On a physical level, we often use the illustration of someone pulling a knife and trying to injure / kill you. If we are not to resist evil with evil, then creating an opening so you can escape by temporarily inflicting pain or temporarily disabling the attacker is not a problem. If instead of escaping or disabling the attacker, you take the knife away and use it on the attacker with the **intent** to kill him because he's trying to kill you, you are then resisting evil with evil and this is wrong.

To take this to extremes, I know of a woman who was raped that did not fight her attacker for 2 reasons, fear and this verse. She came to our church and spoke about emotional healing that God can provide. I asked her afterwards if she would have fought back if she had been trained (she was afraid of being severely injured because she knew nothing about self defense). She said no and quoted Matthew 5:39.

Now let's look at "an eye for an eye". Why did Jesus refer to this passage? Why is it even in the Bible in the first place. Because many people take this out of context, it has caused confusion. We'll look at what this deals with, and how it was being misused during the time of Jesus.

The first place you will find this passage is in Exodus

Exodus 21: 23 states:

But if there is serious injury, then you will give a life for a life, 21:24 eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, 21:25 burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

At first glance, this *appears* to be a license for revenge. However, this verse is part of a passage that is preceded by this verse.

Exodus 21.1

Now these are the ordinances which thou shalt set before them. (ASV)

The LORD continued, "Here are the legal decisions to be used by the Israelites:" (God's Word)

So what we are really dealing with is a passage that sets forth how **legal decisions** are to be handled by the **Jewish authorities**. There is nothing in this passage that allows for personal revenge.

This can be reinforced when looking at Leviticus

Lev 24:10-12

¹⁰And the son of an Israelitish woman, whose father was an Egyptian, went out among the children of Israel: and this son of the Israelitish woman and a man of Israel strove together in the camp; ¹¹And the Israelitish woman's son blasphemed the name of the Lord, and cursed. And they brought him to Moses: (and his mother's name was Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan:) ¹²And they put him in ward, that the mind of the LORD might be showed them.

The situation has been established where someone is being brought before Moses for a **legal decision**.

Lev 24: 13 states "And the Lord spoke to Moses saying"

Then follows a list of instructions given to Moses on how he was to handle disputes brought before him for a legal decision. This list

continues through verse 24:22

In laying out how legal decisions were to be handled, verses 19 thru 22 deal with the law of retribution. This was **only** to be used when MOSES or those he assigned were to make legal decisions. Verse 20 sets forth the eye for an eye passage.

¹⁹ Whoever injures a neighbor must receive the same injury in return-²⁰ "a broken bone for a broken bone, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Whoever injures another person must receive the same.

The last place we find this passage is in Deuteronomy. This time we'll include an entire section intact to illustrate this point.

Deuteronomy 19: 17-21

¹⁷Then both the men, between whom the controversy is, shall stand before the LORD, before the priests and the judges, which shall be in those days; ¹⁸And the judges shall make diligent inquisition: and, behold, if the witness be a false witness, and has testified falsely against his brother; ¹⁹Then shall you do to him, as he had thought to have done to his brother: so shall you put the evil away from among you. ²⁰And those which remain shall hear, and fear, and shall from now on commit no more any such evil among you. ²¹And your eye shall not pity; but life shall go for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

So once more we find, that the idea of an "eye for an eye" is not giving permission to seek revenge, but is to be used as the guiding principle in the Jewish legal process.

Now that we've proven this point, why is this significant? It is important because the Pharisees in Jesus time had taken this passage out of context and used it as a license to seek personal revenge, especially against gentiles. So Jesus was making a statement about not seeking revenge, not about being a pacifist.

Let's take a look at several sources that reinforce the statements above.

The Daily Study Bible- William Barclay

Jesus begins by citing the oldest law in the world - an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. That law is known as the Lex Talionis and it may be described as the law of tit for tat.

Further, this was never a law that gave a private individual the right to extract vengeance; it was always a law which laid down how a judge must assess punishment and penalty (Deuteronomy 19:18)

Barnes New Testament notes:

An eye for an eye, etc. This command is found in Ex 21:24, Lev 24:20, De 19:21. In these places it was given as a rule *to regulate the decisions of judges*. They were to take eye for eye, and tooth for tooth, and to inflict burning for a burning. As a *judicial rule* it is not unjust. Christ finds no fault with the rule as applied to *magistrates*, and does not take upon himself to repeal it. But, instead of confining it to magistrates, the Jews had extended it to *private* conduct, and made it the rule by which to take *revenge*. They considered themselves justified, by this rule, to inflict the same injury on others that they had received. Against this our Saviour remonstrates. He declares that the law had no reference to private revenge; that it was given only to regulate the magistrate; and that their private conduct was to be regulated by different principles.

Abbot's Illustrated New Testament

An eye for an eye, &c. This verse was the rule of law for the guidance of the magistrate in the punishment of offenders.

Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Bible:

An eye for an eye] Our Lord refers here to the law of retaliation mentioned See Clarke on Ex 21:24, (see the note there, and See Clarke on Le 24:20,) which obliged the offender to suffer the *same injury* he had committed. The *Greeks* and *Romans* had the same law. So strictly was it attended to at *Athens*, that if a man put out the eye of another who had but *one*, the offender was condemned to lose *both* his eyes, as the loss of one would not be an *equivalent* misfortune. It seems that the Jews had made this law (the execution of which belonged to the civil magistrate) a ground for authorizing private resentments, and all the excesses committed by a vindictive spirit. Revenge was often carried to the utmost extremity, and more evil returned than what had been received.

People's New Testament:

An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. The law quoted is found in Ex 21:23-25 Le 24:18-20. Moses intended it to protect person and property by prescribing what punishment the law should inflict. He who took a life should lose his life; he who robbed another of an eye should be punished by the loss of an eye. The Jews perverted it to justify private retaliation.

James Faussian Brown Commentary:

38. **Ye have heard that it hath been said**— (Ex 21:23-25; Le 24:19, 20; De 19:21).
An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth—that is, whatever penalty was regarded as a proper equivalent for these. This law of retribution—designed to take vengeance out of the hands of private persons, and commit it to the magistrate—was abused in the opposite way to the commandments of the Decalogue. While they were reduced to the level of civil enactments, this judicial regulation was held to be a warrant for taking redress into their own hands, contrary to the injunctions of the Old Testament itself (Pr 20:22; 24:29).

More sources could be quoted to show this is a historical fact, but I think you get the point.

Now, let's look at the portion which tells believers

“whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

The first response to this passage is to use it as proof of Jesus teaching pacifism. Once again, this comes from a lack of cultural understanding and study.

In actuality, this is referring to a custom in the Mideast that relates to a slap on the cheek with the back of the hand. This was considered a supreme form of insult in that region and still is to this day. The key point to understand is this passage in no way refers to a physical assault with the intent to inflict harm.

In North America this would be equivalent to Jesus telling people “if someone were to spit in your face, wipe it off and don't spit back”.

Although it's more difficult to find material explaining this, a discussion on striking the cheek can be found. Once again, let's look at a couple of references to prove this point.

The Daily Study Bible- William Barclay

So then, for the Christian, Jesus abolishes the old law of limited vengeance and introduces the new spirit of non resentment and non retaliation. He goes on to take three examples of the Christian spirit in operation. To take these examples with a crude and understanding literalism is completely to miss their point. It is therefore necessary to understand what Jesus is saying.

Now according to Jewish Rabbinical law, to hit a man with the back of the hand was twice as insulting as to be hit with the flat of the hand. So then, what Jesus is saying is this: "Even if a man should direct at you the most deadly and calculating *insult*, you must on no account retaliate, and you must on no account resent it.

It will not happen very often, if at all, that anyone will slap us on the face, but time and time again life brings to us insults either great or small; and Jesus is here saying that the true Christian has learned to resent no insult and to seek retaliation for no slight.

The Fourfold Gospel Commentary and Acts of the Apostles

But whosoever smiteth thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. This first example is taken from the realm of physical violence. The example given, a slap in the face, has been regarded as a gross insult in all ages, but it is not an assault which imperils life. We find this precept illustrated by the conduct of the Master himself. He did not literally turn the other cheek to be smitten, but he breathed forth a mild and gentle reproof where he might have avenged himself by the sudden death of his adversary (#John 18:22,23). The example of Paul also is given, but it is not so perfect as that of the Master (#Ac 23:2-5). Self-preservation is a law of God giving rights which, under most circumstances, a Christian can claim. He may resist the robber, the assassin and all men of that ilk, and may protect his person and his possessions against the assaults of the violent and lawless (#Ac 16:35-39).

Last, the next passage talks about ⁴⁰And if any man wants to sue you, and take away your shirt, let him have your coat also. ⁴¹And whoever shall compel you to go one mile, go with him two.

Roman law at this time allowed a Roman citizen to demand a non citizen to give up their clothing if they needed it or to perform any menial task, including the carrying of burdens. A Roman soldier could even take a burden off a pack mule and make a person carry it if he wanted to. Here Jesus is telling people to “go the extra mile” (now you know where that expression came from). The ability to demand carrying a burden was illustrated during Jesus' crucifixion. ²¹And they compelled Simon, a Cyrenian who was passing by on his way in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to bear his cross. (Mark 15:21). The Roman soldiers

were thus legally able to force Simon to carry the cross. So verses 40 and 41 deal with following the law of the governing authorities.

Summary:

To encapsulate everything said here. Jesus was telling people that seeking revenge was against the principles of the Word of God, that we are to accept insults without becoming outraged and seeking to get even, and that we are to obey the laws of the land, even if they don't seem fair.

To conclude this, let me give you some examples of Christian's that defended themselves following the principle's above (not resisting evil with evil) and how the Lord used this for good.

I know of 2 women that defended themselves successfully. Both assailants were caught because of the women defending themselves. Both women defended themselves with the intent of driving the attacker off and had no thought of trying to get even. One assailant had already assaulted several other women. The other assailant had murdered 5 other women and the police told the woman that fought him off, that she would have been killed if she hadn't resisted.

There is a pastor I know that runs a Christian martial arts school. One of his students has a great story. He was an angry individual and came to the school with the intent of squaring off with the pastor and putting him in the hospital. The young man got his wish, but the results were not what he expected. The pastor continuously defended himself and would use every opening to slap the student so he would know that he could easily have been hurt. When the student finally ran out of wind and couldn't attack any more, he asked the pastor why he didn't take him out when he had the chance. The pastor sat him down, talked to him, and led him to receiving Christ. Although the student had evil intent, the pastor responded by defending himself with a loving purpose. The pastor in this story has a school in east L.A. with ex gang members, kids that were drug runners, and others he's led to the Lord through his martial arts program that never would have entered a church. The testimonies of many of his students leave an audience stunned when they hear them.