

## An Eye for an Eye

Matthew 5: 38–42<sup>i</sup>

### It IS Written in Your Law

So far in this section on the sermon on the mount, whenever Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said...” what followed was a quote, not from the law of God, but rather from the tradition of rabbinic wisdom that was rapidly growing up around the law among the scribes and the Pharisees. This morning we have come to a bit of an exception. In Matthew 5, verse 38, Jesus said:

<sup>38</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’” Matthew 5:38 ESV

which is, quite literally a quote from the Law. Exodus 21, verses 23 and 24 say:

<sup>23</sup> But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, <sup>24</sup> eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, <sup>25</sup> burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. Exodus 21:23–25 ESV

Again in Leviticus 24:

<sup>17</sup> “Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death. <sup>18</sup> Whoever takes an animal’s life shall make it good, life for life. <sup>19</sup> If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, <sup>20</sup> fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him. Leviticus 24:17–20 ESV

And yet again in Deuteronomy 19:

<sup>21</sup> Your eye shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot. Deuteronomy 19:21 ESV

Still, when Jesus addressed the subject, He did not say, as we might have expected, “It is written...” or, “It is written in your law...” rather, He said,

<sup>38</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’” Matthew 5:38 ESV

At first glance then, it might appear that Jesus is actually altering if not abrogating at least this bit of God’s Law in favor of something entirely different; as if He was saying, “The Law was harsh and unyielding, but I say, ‘In the end, Love Wins, so, just follow your heart.’”

So, before we can move on, we have to ask if that’s really the case, and if so, then is that also the case in all of the other illustrations that Jesus used here as well. The answer, of course, is an unequivocal “No. Absolutely not. May it never be,” (to echo the Apostle Paul). We have to remember that this whole section on the Law began in verses 17 and 18, where Jesus clearly said:

<sup>17</sup> “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup> For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Matthew 5:17–18 ESV

It was against *that* background that Jesus said:

<sup>20</sup> For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 5:20 ESV

So, the issue was not that the Law of God said certain things, but the scribes and Pharisees weren't very good at keeping them and you must do better; nor was the issue that the Law of God said certain things, but that Jesus was somehow relaxing those things in favor of a new "law of love". The first and greatest commandment, according to Jesus, is,

<sup>37</sup> ... "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." Matthew 22:37 ESV

And in 1st John we read,

<sup>3</sup> For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. 1 John 5:3 ESV

There can be no sense in which Jesus was saying, "The Law, in Exodus, Leviticus, *and* Deuteronomy said, 'An eye for an eye...' but I'm telling you that's not true any longer." That would have Jesus contradicting Himself in the space of about 20 verses in Matthew 5, and would go against the entire arc of Scripture. So, what is going on here? How are we to reconcile this apparent difficulty?

### **Sphere Sovereignty.**

To do that (and it is something that we will do next Sunday, if the Lord is willing), first we have to go back to Exodus 18 when the people of Israel had recently come up out of Egypt and encamped at the foot of Mount Sinai. At that time,

<sup>1</sup> Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel his people, how the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt. Exodus 18:1 ESV

and he brought Moses' sons and his wife to him in the wilderness where Israel was encamped. But the next day, Jethro observed that the people were coming to Moses to inquire of the Lord, keeping Moses busy from morning till evening and allowing no time for anything else. Observing this, Moses' father-in-law advised that he should

<sup>21</sup> ...look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. <sup>22</sup> And let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. <sup>23</sup> If you do this, God will direct you, you will be able to endure, and all this people also will go to their place in peace." Exodus 18:17-23 ESV

So, while we often think of Sinai as this amazing moment in history when God gave His Law word to His people and established the religion of Israel, we also see here the beginning of what would later be known as "sphere sovereignty" where the government of the nation (that's what judging the people was all about) would be given to one group of people, and the

government of the church to another, and both under the direction and limitation of the Law of God.

At Sinai then, God gave the pattern for the way that government was meant to work from that time on. Our neighbors to the south (and even Canadians, sometimes), will speak of the separation of church and state, which is true enough. The state is not under the authority of the church, nor is the church under the authority of the state, at least it is not meant to be. They *can* interact with one another up to a certain point, but both have their separate areas of sovereignty, and neither is meant to lord it over the other.

The thing is, **over both the church and the state** stands the Law of God by which God in His absolute authority over all things regulates and limits the authority of everything else. So, when we speak of sphere sovereignty, we are acknowledging the legitimate authority of the state, and of the church, of the home, and even of the individual, but this does not in any way limit the authority of God over all things. Rather, it establishes the authority of God over all things.

### In the State.

So, even while we may rightly speak of sphere sovereignty, we must acknowledge as we are doing so that God is King, and His word rules over all. Jesus Christ, for example, is King **over** the state. Psalm 2 states:

<sup>2</sup> The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, <sup>3</sup> “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.”

But,

<sup>4</sup> He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. <sup>5</sup> Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, <sup>6</sup> “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.” Psalm 2:2–6 ESV

Human governments, no matter what form they take, have no right to legislate against the Law of God, even if that’s what the majority of the people want. Let me say that again, just in case you thought maybe you heard me wrong. **Human governments no matter what form they may take—constitutional monarchy, federal republic, or dictatorship—have no right to legislate against the Law of God, even if that’s what the majority of the people want.**

The issue of abortion, for example, is one in which the church is sometimes said to interfere in the politics or sovereignty of the state, but this is not true. What the church, and individual Christians for that matter, ought to be doing in every instance is merely reminding the state that God’s Law, which is over all, decrees “You shall not murder,” and this is not only the law for the Christian church, it is the law for everyone and the state must not legislate against God’s Law. As the prophet Isaiah said,

<sup>1</sup> **Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees**, and the writers who keep writing oppression, <sup>2</sup> to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be their spoil, and that they may make the fatherless their prey! <sup>Isaiah</sup>  
10:1–2 ESV

So, for all of the posturing that we are seeing from both parties in this U.S. election cycle, in the end it doesn't matter what a Harris or a Trump presidency might think or say about the murder of the unborn, nor does it matter what a Liberal or a potential Conservative government will say about it here in Canada. In the end, it only matters what Jesus Christ who is King of kings and Lord of lords says about it, and He says, "You shall not murder."

In the end this will not be adjudicated by a referendum of the people, by the people, and for the people. In the end, the nations will be judged according to the Law of the One who is King over all nations, and our nation, and our rulers would do well to kiss—to honor—the Son,

<sup>12</sup> ...lest He be angry, and [they] perish in the way, when His wrath is kindled but a little...  
Psalm 2:12 NKJV

### In the Church.

Jesus Christ is King of the nations, and He is also King over the church. Colossians 1, verses 17 and 18:

<sup>17</sup> And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup> And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, **that in everything he might be preeminent.** <sup>Colossians 1:17–18 ESV</sup>

Of course, if Jesus Christ is preeminent "in everything," all the rest should go without saying, but sadly, it doesn't. Jesus Christ is the Lord of the Church. He is preeminent. He rules by His Word, and His Word is authoritative, sufficient, and infallible. It "contains the will of God completely", and since the entire manner of service which God requires of us is described in it at great length no one—even an apostle or an angel from heaven, as Paul says—ought to teach other than what the Holy Scriptures have already taught us."<sup>ii</sup>

And, once again, this is true **even if a majority of the people in the church would rather that it was not.** There's a moment in the film *Chariots of Fire* when Eric Liddel's father reminds a friend,

The Kingdom of God is not a democracy...

(and the same is true of the church). He went on:

The Lord never seeks reelection. There's no discussion; no deliberation; no referendum as to which road to take. There's one right; one wrong; one absolute ruler."<sup>iii</sup>

Jesus Christ is Lord of His church, and he governs by His word and Spirit,

Therefore we must not consider human writings no matter how holy their authors may have been equal to the divine writings; nor may we put custom, nor the majority, nor age,

nor the passage of time or persons, nor councils, decrees, or official decisions above the truth of God, for truth is above everything else.<sup>iv</sup>

### In the Home.

Another sphere where the sovereignty—the authority—of Christ is absolute is the family. I can't begin to do justice to this—it's a sermon or a series, all on it's own—so, some other time if the Lord is willing.

For this morning, just note that this applies to the structure of the family as we find it so often in Scripture, and it also applies to the manner in which the family is meant to live together before God. You can see both aspects in Ephesians 5, verse 22 – chapter 6, verse 9. In that text (as in many others), God defines and regulates the relationships between wife and husband, husband and wife, parents and children, and even servants and masters (which would have been considered a household matter throughout most of history).

It is precisely because Jesus is Lord of the family, that He gets to define and regulate these things by His holy Word, and we'll have to leave it there for today, because Jesus is Lord of the nations, the church, and the family, but finally this morning (and perhaps most importantly if we are ever to see the Lordship of Christ worked out practically in these other spheres), He is Lord of every individual man, woman, and child in this universe.

### Over the Individual.

In the same way that Scripture is the infallible rule of all things to the church, and the family then, it also speaks to the individual, calling us one and all to bow and submit to the Lordship of Christ.

There is not the slightest notion in Scripture that Jesus is our Lord only when we make Him so. He IS Lord. That is why we bow. He IS Lord. That is why He calls all men everywhere to repent. He is Lord. That is why God

<sup>31</sup> ...has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed...

(this very same Jesus),

...and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." Acts 17:31 ESV

So, He calls us to repent and believe because He can, and He can because He is Lord. Whether or not we acknowledge and submit, He is Lord. Whether or not we recognize His right to rule over us, He is Lord and He will rule over us, as He rules over all things, completely and finally on that day when He will judge the world in righteousness.

On that day, all who have not confessed with their mouths that Jesus Christ is Lord, and believed in their hearts that God has raised Him from the dead—some of whom will say, "You are not the boss of me!" and some of whom will say,

<sup>22</sup> “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?” Matthew 7:22 ESV

—but on that day all alike who have not believed and confessed that Jesus is their Lord, will hear the last word that the Lord of heaven and earth will ever speak to them,

<sup>23</sup> ...“I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.” Matthew 7:23 ESV

This is simply the authority—the sovereignty—of Christ Jesus, as it is and will be applied not only to nations, and churches, and families, but to every individual who has ever lived.

### **Now Is the Accepted Time.**

Whether or not we acknowledge Him as Lord, King, and Judge now, on *that* day we will know, and that’s why

<sup>2</sup> ...now is the accepted time...now is the day of salvation. 2 Corinthians 6:2 NKJV

<sup>26</sup> For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, <sup>27</sup> but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Hebrews 10:26–27 ESV

Still, God loved the world that He made, and this is how He loved it.

<sup>16</sup> ...He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world...

He didn’t have to—we were condemned already—so He sent His Son

...that the world through Him might be saved. John 3:16–17 NKJV

So, turn to Him right now, trust in Him, confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and then together let us turn our eyes to the heavens and confidently await as judge the very One who has already stood trial before God in our place and so has removed the whole curse from all His people.<sup>v</sup>

Jesus Christ our Lord calls us. May God give us ears to hear.

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i All Scripture citations unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 5:38.  
ii Christian Reformed Church (CRCNA), “The Belgic Confession, Article 7”, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Publications, 1988) 82.  
iii Anchorsaway Ministries. 2014. “Chariots of Fire Clip.” YouTube. July 15, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=edaYv5L7SDA>.  
iv CRCNA, “Belgic Confession, Article 7”, *Ecumenical Creeds*, 82.  
v CRCNA, “Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 52”, *Ecumenical Creeds*, 33.