

Talionis, is stated three times: in Exodus 21:23, in Leviticus 24:19-20, and in Deuteronomy 19:16-21. In Deuteronomy 19:16-21 we read:

If a malicious witness takes the stand to accuse a man of a crime, the two men involved in the dispute must stand in the presence of the Lord before the priests and the judges who are in office at the time. The judges must make a thorough investigation, and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against his brother, then do to him as he intended to do to his brother. You must purge the evil from among you. The rest of the people will hear of this and be afraid, and never again will such an evil thing be done among you. Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

This principle was never intended to be used by individuals as a standard of personal retaliation against their enemies, but only by judges as a standard of governmental punishment of evil doers. In Jesus' day some Jews wanted to use governmental standards of equitable judgment to achieve individual retribution. If someone injured them, they wanted to personally retaliate in kind! If another person knocked out their tooth, they wanted to knock out that person's tooth! They felt that would be only fair and equitable!

But God did not give this standard to Israelites so that they could achieve justice by taking the law into their own hands, but so that the judges could judge righteous and equitable judgment!

I believe that Matthew 5:38-41 should be understood in just this way. Jesus said: "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 someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles."

Jesus was speaking to some people who would seek to resist personal evil by personally inflicting physical punishment on those who did the evil to them. He told them not to retaliate in kind. Thus "turning the other cheek" is not a standard for governments to follow, but one for Christians to follow; and it applies only in settings of personal conflict.

I believe that this is exactly what the framers of the Dordrecht Confession of Faith of 1632 (a famous Mennonite confession) had in mind in article 14, when they wrote:

As regards revenge, that is, to oppose an enemy with the sword, we believe and confess that the Lord Christ has forbidden and set aside to His disciples and followers all revenge and retaliation, and commanded them to render to no one evil for evil, or cursing for cursing, but to put the sword into the sheath, or, as the prophets have predicted, to beat the swords into ploughshares. . .