



Ministry of the Word
Sunday 13th January 2021
by Vincent Gannon

Scripture: Matthew 5:38-42
Subject: Part 29 – Citizen's Attitude

38 "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' 39 But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. 40 If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. 41 And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. 42 Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.

Throughout chapter 5 from verses 21, right to the end of the chapter, Jesus compares the Scribes and Pharisees' traditional understanding of the law with God's truth. He uses a little code - It's this: "You have heard it said - that's your system, but I say unto you - this is God's standard" God's standard is higher than man's. From the start of this chapter, Jesus continually points out that God looks at the hearts and minds of people, not just their actions. Verse 43 says - 'You think it's enough to love your neighbour and hate your enemy, God says love your enemy'. Wow! God raises the standard beyond what we think is natural to us.

The verses that we are looking at tonight are challenging, and have been confusing for some people. There are people who have used this passage to teach lawlessness, while for others, they've used this passage to teach pacifism. Again, some have used it to teach conscientious objection to war, others have used it to instruct on anti-capital punishments, even some have used it to get more money from their congregations while others have used it to bring about disbelief in civil law and justice. A great example of this is Tolstoy, a famous Russian novelist, who used this very passage to make the point that there should be no police, no armies, no

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soldiers, even no authorities in society to have utopia. While he may have been a great novelist, he didn't have such a great insight into the heart of man as God does. But that shouldn't surprise us as people have come out with statement like, 'the bible condones slavery' or 'the bible condones mutilation' which is absolutely far from the truth, as we who study the bible know. That is why we really need to look at these verses that we have before us carefully, because we will see The Law Of Retribution (v.38), The Law Of Resistance (vv.39-41), Dignity (v.39b), Security (v.40), Liberty (v.41) and The Law Of Generosity (v.42).

This passage is superb in putting into balance and perspective where the law fits in the life of a believer, as well as the rights of a believer. As we know, the Bible upholds law and order. While we can talk about forgiveness and we can talk about turning the other cheek, it never is to the detriment of what is lawful, and we'll see that as we go. So there's a beautiful balance in this. And if you see your way clear through this, you'll understand that.

God instituted judges and magistrates and authorities to take care of civil matters. All throughout the Bible, God exalts law. God made society to be lawful. He established the law in the Old Testament. In fact, we find the reference Jesus makes in verse 38 in Exodus 21:24, which simply reads - "*eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot*".

This law was given to control violence and if you wish to, you can read from verse 12-27 of Exodus 21 to put it in context. It also ensured that people gave credible witness, just as we saw in verses 33 to 37. Remember, if a person bears false witness, then they would receive the punishment that the person they accused had/or could have endured. These laws that we find in the Old Testament were given to protect society, to establish justice, and to make it as fair as possible. The difference then, from today, is that they (the Jewish people) were taught these laws from early childhood. They didn't need a professor of law to explain the law of God to them.

The laws God gave to them were to regulate and prevent violence among the people. We find it again in Leviticus 24:20. There it says, "*fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; as he has caused disfigurement of a man, so shall it be done to him*".

It was also placed in Deuteronomy 19:21: "*Your eye shall not pity: life shall be for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.*"

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This is the oldest written judicial law in the world that we have, did you know that? It's known as lex talionis. It is found in the Code of Hammurabi which is a well-preserved Babylonian code of law of ancient Mesopotamia, dated to about 1754 BC (Middle Chronology). It is one of the oldest deciphered writings of significant length in the world. The sixth Babylonian king, Hammurabi, enacted the code. Sometimes it's called tit for tat, sometimes it's called quid pro quo. It just means equal punishment for the crime. In the Code of Hammurabi, it says this: ***"If a man has caused the loss of a gentleman's eye, his eye shall be caused to be lost. If he shattered a gentleman's limb, one shall shatter his limb."*** In other words, bound up in the human heart is a sense of justice. But the problem is it gets perverted into vengeance.

While law is a restraint, it did not, nor does it deter those who are intent on doing harm but it spelled out the consequences that followed such actions.

We might believe that we have come a long way from such "archaic laws" and that we are more civilised, and believe in human rights, children's rights, prisoners' rights, animal rights, to name but a few. The unions have unions to demand rights for employees. We are all very conscious of our rights, we hear about it every day. However, often when people are so focused on their rights, the upshot of it is going to be lawlessness because often the dominant characteristics that comes out of it all is selfishness which begins to take place, people then invariably tread on each other, and before we know it, in the fight for rights, the law can become a casualty.

In the fall, that sense of justice became perverted into a vengeful spirit. It isn't so much the idea that if a person does something wrong, we want it to be made right to uphold the law and to maintain a righteous standard so that God, who made the righteous standard, can be glorified, it's that we want to get even. And that's the perversion of a moral righteousness.

Nowadays, we've gone from one extreme to another, where the fear of justice no longer exists for those who habitually break the law. Many would point to an imbalance of justice, such as one for the rich and one for the poor. The inconsistencies are even more startling when you look at European law.



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The laws we find in the Old Testament had to do with punishment to suit the crime to be sure, but it went further than that. The punishment was to match the crime but not exceed the harm done by the offense itself. This was God's provision for Israel's civil law. It was merciful because it regulated and prevented excessive punishment thereby it limited the innate propensity of the human heart to seek retribution beyond what the offence deserved. It limited personal vengeance and angry retaliation of the kind Lamech boasted of in Genesis 4:23-24. Let's quickly turn there -

*"Then Lamech said to his wives: "Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; Wives of Lamech, listen to my speech! For I have killed a man for wounding me, Even a young man for hurting me.
²⁴ If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, Then Lamech seventy-sevenfold."*

It was of course beneficial to society, because as we all know, human vengeance is never satisfied with justice. It seems that we all want a pound of flesh for an ounce of the offence as Shylock said in William Shakespeare's 'Merchant of Venice' play "*The pound of flesh which I demand of him is dearly bought, is mine, and I will have it*". Some things never change. That is why God restricts vengeance to Himself. Deuteronomy 32:35;

"Vengeance is Mine, and recompense; Their foot shall slip in due time; For the day of their calamity is at hand, And the things to come hasten upon them.'

We find this also in Romans 12:19 *Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord.*

And again in Hebrews 10:30; *For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. And again, "The LORD will judge His people."*

Vengeance is God's and God's command us to live according to His ways, as we read in Proverbs 25:21 *"If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; And if he is thirsty, give him water to drink;"*

Also in Romans 12:19-21; *Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰ Therefore "If your*



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enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.”²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

You have to admit that this behaviour needs the presence of God in the Christian’s life.

Proverbs 24:29 tells us as individuals our limits; *“Do not say, “I will do to him just as he has done to me; I will render to the man according to his work.”*

The kings and many rulers took the law into their own hands, contrary to what the Scripture teaches, and they were not always “just”.

This is the Law Of Retribution (v.38) and as we move on into verse 39 - Let’s remind ourselves of verse 39 - which says: *But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.*

Whatever we might think about crime and consequences, we need to consider what Jesus is teaching His disciples in these verses, and it's about resistancing taking vengeance as opposed to condoning evil, and also how we respond to dignity.

The verse begins with what some perceive to be passive towards “him who is evil”. It says *“But I tell you not to resist an evil person.”*, what are we to make of this? Remember, while Jesus is teaching his disciples primarily in this sermon, He is also rebuking the Pharisees and Scribes’ teachings as they had perverted the law of God!

So Let’s examine this. Jesus is not teaching that no stand should be taken against evil and that it should be allowed to run its own course. We know this because Jesus came to uphold the Law not demolish it and that would be contrary to the rest of the Bible if one was to embrace such a notion. Jesus along with the apostles as well as true believers continually opposed evil with every means and resources.

The early church as well as the church today take to war on their knees, practically implementing the teachings of Christ, whenever and wherever possible, they sought to change things in society, legally. As individuals, we are commanded to *“resist the devil”* James 4:7 and 1 Peter 5:9. We are to resist all the evil he stands for and inspires, see Matthew 6:13 and Romans 12:9 along with 1 Thessaloians 5:22 and 2 Timothy 4:18. The resisting of evil goes further than just our own lives, it includes the church, the body of Christ. Here, where

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it is often the most difficult, it shows us that the devil neither stands outside its doors or takes a back seat. For the sake of God's righteousness, as well as for the sake of human justice, believers are obligated to uphold the law themselves, (insofar as it is biblical) and to encourage that others do so as well. To report crime is an act of compassion, righteousness, and godly obedience as well as an act of civil responsibility. To belittle, excuse, or hide the wrongdoing of others is not an act of love but an act of wickedness, because it undermines civil justice and divine righteousness.

As long as the natural human heart exists, evil will have to be restrained by law. Our crime wrecked society would do well to think and consider what results when we abandon God. When God is forsaken, His righteous standards are forsaken, and His law is forsaken. Antinomianism, doing away with law, is as much an enemy of the gospel as legalism and works righteousness. The Old and New Testaments are never at odds in regards to law, grace, justice and mercy. No matter where in the bible you look, old or new, the bible teaches that God is righteous and just as well as merciful and loving. The revelation of God is unchanging.

When the church stopped preaching God's righteousness, justice, and eternal punishment of the lost, it stopped preaching the fullness of the gospel, and both society and the church have suffered greatly for it. When the church stopped holding its own members accountable to God's standards and stopped disciplining, a great deal of its moral influence on society was sacrificed. One of the legacies of theological liberalism is civil as well as religious lawlessness. Not to restrain evil is unjust and unkind for it fails to protect the innocent and has the effect of encouraging the wicked in their evil. To lower God's standard of justice is to lower God's standard of righteousness.

That word '*resist*' there in this verse, verse 39, means to set against or oppose, and in this context, it refers to our response when harm is done to us by someone who is evil. Jesus is speaking of personal resentment, spite, and vengeance. Vengeful retaliation has no place in society at large, and even less among those who belong to Christ. We are called to overcome someone's evil toward us by doing good to them (Romans 12:21).

As Paul taught earlier in Romans 12 verses 17 and 19, saying , *"Never pay back evil for evil to anyone... Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord"*

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Jesus is teaching about dignity here as he talks about turning the other cheek. This has nothing to do with defending yourself against physical attack or defending legally your country in a time of war, or policing the land that is another subject. Every human being has the right to be treated with basic dignity, respect, and consideration because every person is created in God's image, therefore, God demands that we treat one another with respect. But God knows that we, as His children, will not always be treated as we would like. Often for the very reason, that we belong to God and go by the name of His Son. We can expect to be mistreated, ridiculed, and held in contempt (*see Matthew 10:16-23; John 15:18—16:3; 1 Peter 2:20-21; 3:13-17; 4:12-19; 2 Timothy 3:12*). Jesus is talking about how we react to mistreatment and insult.

To strike someone on the body might cause more physical harm, but a slap in the face, especially on the right cheek was an attack on one's personal honour and was considered to be a terrible indignity. It was a vicious angry reaction, indicating an act of insult. It was to be treated with disdain, as being less than a human. A slap in the face was among the most demeaning and contemptuous of acts (*Matthew 26:67-68; Mark 14:65; John 18:22*). Even a slave would rather have been stuck across the back with a whip than be slapped in the face by his master's hand. We even say today, when we are embarrassed, or someone insulted us or humiliated us - 'That was a real slap in the face'.

Yet, when we are insulted, maligned, and treated with contempt, either literally or figuratively struck on the cheek by someone, we are to turn the other cheek. Jesus' point pertains more to what we are not to do than what we are to do. Turning the other cheek symbolizes the non-avenging, non-retaliatory, humble, and gentle spirit that is to characterise God's kingdom citizens (*see Matthew 5 verses 3 and 5*).

Jesus strongly resisted evil that was directed against others, especially His Father. For example, when He cleansed out the Temple of those who defiled His Father's house. He was not acting on personal vengeance (*Matthew 26:53*). In fact, when the leaders of the Sanhedrin, and later the soldiers, physically abused Him and mocked Him, He did not retaliate either in words or in actions (*Matthew 26:67-68*) even though He had both the power and ability to do so. As Isaiah had predicted of Him, Christ gave His back to those who struck Him and His cheeks to those who plucked out His beard (*Isaiah 50:6*). As Jesus hung from the



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cross, He prayed, *“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing”* (Luke 23:34). Peter sums up our Lord’s example in 1 Peter 2:20-23:

“But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favour with God. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously”.

When someone attacks our right to dignity, we ought not to defend that right by retaliation, revenge, or getting our own back. Or as some would say *“I will wait my time and pay them back”*. We are to leave the protection and defence of our dignity in God’s hands, knowing that one day we will live and reign with him in His kingdom in great glory. There is something in the human mind and heart that does want to get their own back, if only to prove you can’t be walked all over or easily insulted and let away with it. No! we take the stand that we can give as good if not better than we got. So, we do need the help of the Holy Spirit in such circumstances as well as in every other.

What lesson should we learn from this? Clearly Jesus has not been trying to bring us back under law but upward in grace. He’s addressing the heart of the believer, the kingdom’s standards and crucifying the old flesh, for that is what being a new creation in Christ is all about.

I remember an old story about a woman who was married to a drunk. Things got very bad and she went to the pastor and said, *“I’ve given up. I’ve done everything to correct his life. I have chased him around with a frying pan,”* and so on. And he said, *“Oh, my dear lady, have you thought about heaping coals of fire on his head?”* She said, *“My dear, pastor, I’ve thought of some awful things but never that.”* She didn’t get the point. Heaping coals of fire on the head is simply turning back hate with love that brings shame. It’s very embarrassing, for people when you return their hate with love. Overcome evil with what? Good. That’s a tremendous truth.



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From Dignity to security - we come to verse 40 *'If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also'*

Jesus now speaks about someone wanting to sue you. Obviously they need a reason to do so, but Jesus is ultimately speaking about our reaction to such. The idea of course of someone suing you for your clothing seems out of place to us but back then it was very different. I wonder if this is where the saying comes from about taking "the shirt off your back"? But what is our reaction to such? Jesus is not addressing the happenings that goes on in the world but what goes on in the believers hearts and minds, then our behaviour. If we have wronged someone, then we need to put it right. This isn't about waiting until your day in court, but Jesus is talking about someone just wanting to sue, You are not to allow things to get too far, in as much as you can possibly do within your power. We've seen this before in this chapter in verse 25 which says *"Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison."* It goes back to this principle.

On the other side of this coin, sometimes people will take advantage of us. Spurgeon said, *"Sometimes we have to be the anvil while bad men are the hammers."* And that's true. Now you say, "Wait a minute, I have someone trying to sue me and I'll teach him a lesson." The Christian is to be concerned with putting things right always, and that's any offense caused, not just waiting until someone wants to sue you.

However, if someone wants to sue you, Jesus in this verse says, "Let him sue you and then give to him". It's very important we understand what Jesus is actually teaching here because if people found out that Christians believed this wrongly, they'd start suing us all over the place and take everything we had. Jesus is talking about when there's apparently some justification for this person's suit. He is suing you for your tunic. And if you are going to be sued, then give that person your coat also, or whatever is it, and don't do it grudgingly. Don't be bitter, or angry. Don't retaliate. Show him that you are really sorry that it ever happened. Show him you're so generous that all you've got left to keep you warm, your last little bit of security is your cloak, and you're willing to give him that too. Now that'll shock him. That'll show him the love of Christ. That'll show them what it means to love your enemies as we will see in verse 44.



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“Bless them that curse you and do good to them that hate you and pray for them that despitefully use you.” If somebody wants to sue you, even take everything you’ve got, and he has some justifiable reason for it, then it's time to show how your heart is right toward him. Give him more than he even asked for, and you’ll show them as we’ll see in verse 45, is *“that you are the sons of your Father.”*

Let’s move on to verse 41 where we see liberty - *‘And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two.’*

I believe we all know the saying, “going the extra mile”, going further than required. Perhaps you like to know how this saying came about. This compelling to go a mile is a reference to a custom which was very common in the ancient world, by means of which a government official had a right to commandeer a man in a matter of carrying baggage or a cross. For example, when the Romans got Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus’ cross on the way to Golgotha. Simon became an aggaros (messenger); he was compelled to do that by the government. Imagine that happening in our society that way? I don’t think that would work out.

If a certain amount of baggage, even armour, had to be moved within the mile, the authorities had the right to commandeer a man at any place and make him carry the baggage for one mile. The Roman army was in control of the Jews in Jesus’ day, and they very frequently did this sort of thing. That is the kind of thing our Lord had in mind and He says: ‘When they come to you like that and compel you to go a mile, go beyond what they have demanded’.

What if God, the One who is greater than all, asks you to go a mile with Him? Would you feel, “Well I did my duty” or would you go the extra mile? The principle is that, not only are we to do what is demanded of us, we are to go beyond it, in the spirit of our Lord’s teaching. While Paul was speaking about Bondservants in Ephesians 6 verse 5-8, here we could apply the same principle which is *“Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; 6 not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, 7 with goodwill doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men, 8 knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free.*

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Surely regardless of the circumstance we find ourselves in, we can have liberty in Christ, knowing that all we do, we can do unto Him.

Another way of looking at this passage is concerned with a man's natural resentment at the demands of authority upon him. It has reference to our dislike and hatred of rules of which we do not approve, I'm sure we've all said at some point - *But why should I obey? How can I get out of this?* That is the attitude our Lord is condemning. Let us be perfectly practical. Our Lord says that not only must we not resent these things, we must do them willingly; and we must even be prepared to go beyond what is demanded of us. We may do our duty because we have to but going the extra mile is doing it because we love the Lord and we want to honour Him in every way we can.

Finally we come to verse 42 *Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.*

We have been looking at surrendering our in amenable rights in relation to the Law Of Retribution (v.38), The Law Of Resistance (vv.39-41), Dignity (v.39b), Security (v.40), Liberty (v.41) and now finally, the Law of generosity which can often reveal the hidden gods in our hearts. What I mean by that is really possessiveness. We dislike giving up, even temporarily, that which belongs to us. Even as Christians, we often forget that nothing truly belongs to us and that we are only stewards of what belongs to God. But as far as other people are concerned, we do have a right to keep that which we possess. By right it is ours to use or dispose of as we see fit.

But even our possession should be placed on the altar of obedience to Christ; if and when required. When someone asks to borrow something from us, we should not turn away from him or her. In other words, we should give him what he wants. The implication is that the person who asks has a genuine need. We are not required to respond to every foolish, selfish request made of us. Sometimes to give a person what he wants but does not need is a disservice, doing him more harm than good.

Also implied is the principle that we should offer to give what is needed as soon as we know of the need, whether or not we are asked for help. He is speaking of generosity that genuinely wants to meet the other person's need, not tokenism that does a good deed to buy off one's



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own conscience or begrudgingly, but we are to give willingly and cheerfully. God is saying, "This is the kind of heart you ought to have." When somebody wants to borrow what you have, let him have it. You have here the principle of self-sacrificing generosity. God, help us to be generous. Deuteronomy 15:7 tells us - ***"If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates in your land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother"***

Jesus does not undercut civil justice, which belongs in the courtroom. He undercuts personal selfishness, especially in the hearts of His kingdom's people. The only person who is non-defensive, non-vengeful, never bears a grudge, and has no spite in his heart is the person who has died to self. To fight for one's rights is to prove that self is still on the throne of the heart. The believer who is faithful to Christ lives for Him and, if necessary, dies for Him (Romans 14:8). It is impossible to live for self and for Christ at the same time.

George Mueller wrote, ***"There was a day when I died, utterly died to George Mueller and his opinions, his preferences, and his tastes and his will. I died to the world, to its approval and its censure. I died to the approval or the blame of even my brethren and friends. And since then I have studied only to show myself approved unto God."***

This is the spirit Jesus teaches in this passage, a spirit all men fail to possess apart from those who have experienced saving grace. It is the spirit Abraham manifested when he gave the best land to his nephew Lot. It is the spirit of Joseph when he embraced and kissed the brothers who had so terribly wronged him. It is the spirit that would not let David take advantage of the opportunity to take the life of Saul, who was then seeking to take David's life. It is the spirit that led Elisha to feed the enemy Assyrian army. It is the spirit that led Stephen to pray for those who were stoning him to death. It is the spirit of every believer who, by the Holy Spirit's power, seeks to be perfect even as our heavenly Father is perfect (v. 48). The heart of the matter, then, is to understand what it means to die to self. John MacAuliffe said and I think this is very helpful ***"When you're forgiven, or neglected, or purposely set at naught, and you sting and hurt with the insult or the oversight, but your heart is happy, being counted worthy to suffer for Christ, that is dying to self. When your good is evil spoken of, when your wishes are crossed, your advice disregarded, your opinions***



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ridiculed, and you refuse to let anger rise in your heart, or even defend yourself, but you take it all in patience, loving silence, that is dying to self.

And when you lovingly and patiently bear any disorder, any irregularity, any annoyance, when you can stand face-to-face with waste and folly and extravagance and spiritual insensibility and you can endure it as Jesus endured it, that is dying to self. And when you are content with any circumstance, any food, any offering, any clothing, any climate, any society, any solicitude, any interruption by the will of God, that is dying to self.

And when you never care to refer to yourself in conversation, or to record your own good works, or itch after any commendation from others, when you can truly love to be unknown, that is dying to self. When you see your brother prosper and have his needs met and can honestly rejoice with him in spirit and feel no envy nor question God while your own needs are far greater and your circumstances more desperate, that is dying to self. And when you can receive correction and reproof from one of less stature than yourself and can humbly submit inwardly as well as outwardly, finding no rebellion or resentment rising up within your heart, that is dying to self.

So it's time to ask yourself a question, which is - Are you dead yet? Are you living a life that is balancing between holding up God's law in this evil society while pouring out a heart filled with forgiveness, filled with love but empty of any vengeance, empty of self? This can be possible when we really learn what Jesus meant when he said in Luke 9 verse 23 - *"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me."*

This is a real challenge, but it's possible with the help of Jesus.

Amen