



AWKWARD VERSES... AN EYE FOR AN EYE

Matthew 5:38-42; Exodus 21:22-24

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Presbyterians are people of the Book, that is, all we believe and do is based upon the Bible. But, clearly, there are passages we no longer follow and some things we believe even seem contrary to Scripture.

This month, we will be exploring those texts which prove problematic or inconvenient for our beliefs today. We will look at verses in the New Testament which, at first glance, seem to deny women's leadership roles. We will examine how we hold true to Scripture while fully affirming the call of women to ordained ministry in the church. We will discover that historic interpretations of verses used to restrict the role of women in the church do not hold up under closer scrutiny.

At the end of the month, we will turn to Ananias and Sapphira, members of the fledgling Christian community in Acts. We believe that God is one of grace and forgiveness, seen most clearly in Jesus Christ. But, when Ananias and Sapphira failed to pledge their resources to God, they were struck dead! That hardly seems merciful and gracious.

Today, we will dive deeper into the Exodus passage that calls for an "eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth"! It is in the Bible, so we are supposed to follow it – right? Old Testament justice, it is called. Sometimes, it is referred to as "the law of retaliation". There was even a movie entitled "Eye for an Eye" with Sally Fields, who exacts revenge upon the murderer of her children. It is inconvenient for our faith today because we believe God calls us to the opposite of revenge – to forgiveness. Jesus teaches us to forgive those who have wronged us.

How do we account for this change?

The Old Testament law is clear. It does not equivocate – an eye for an eye. Yet, Jesus offers something radically new.

Did God used to be a really angry God and, when he had a son, he became soft on crime? What changed? How did we go from an eye for an eye to turn the other cheek? I suppose Jesus would never be elected as a district attorney; nor a bench judge – no death penalty; no harsh sentences.

But rather than dismissing this passage as outdated, through a closer look at the context, we will discover how this Exodus passage still has power to speak to us today, while finding that Jesus' reinterpretation moves us into a higher calling.

Remember, in Biblical times as people settled into cities from nomadic living, a complex social hierarchy took hold in the ancient world. Those in authority were exalted, as in the case of the Egyptian pharaoh – all the way to the status of godhood.

This was not simple, social stratification. It was an embedded belief that those of higher social status were qualitatively superior to those beneath them. Because of this, justice was meted out with a clear bias toward those with greater power and wealth.

In other words, if a slave broke his master's arm, he would be killed for it. That was what justice would have dictated.

Now consider the Hebrew people. They spent hundreds of years in the clutches of the pharaoh with all its cultural baggage. As God delivered them into the Promised Land, the Lord sought a different way of living for them and a profoundly different understanding.

All people are created in God's image. Every single one. That is what Genesis teaches us. This means, first of all, that no person is inherently of greater value because of their social station. Secondly, each life is precious to God.

Now I don't mean to imply that Israel was a land of equality and equal opportunity – it wasn't. They carried much of the social problems and prejudices that they learned in Egypt for centuries, as did most all cultures of that time. For one, slavery was simply accepted and the role of women was still one of a second or third-class citizen.

And yet, this law of God, in Exodus, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth was not a law of revenge or Wild West justice. It was, in fact, the opposite.

It was a statement that no life is of more value than the other. So, if the slave takes out his master's eye, then his punishment is to have his eye taken, not his life. Or if someone steals a loaf of bread, you don't cut off his arm.

Practically, this meant a monetary amount was required that was considered the equivalent value of the loss incurred. Except in the case of murder. If a person in power takes the life of another, then his life shall be taken. No special breaks for the wealthy.

Instead of a law of revenge, this passage discloses a growing awareness that the nature of this God was one of love for all people.

Remember that in the Promised Land the law of the land and the religious instruction were the same. There was no such thing as the separation of church and state in those days.

So, these statutes in Exodus served as the laws of governance for the people of Israel. These were the laws that held the community together.

An eye for eye was a lesson in equal justice, establishing laws that mitigated against wanton revenge. Its purpose was to forge the people of Israel into a nation built on God's laws.

But then Jesus comes along and offers something new, saying,

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer.

"You have heard that it was said...." Right away, Jesus' choice of words challenges the Old Testament. Rather than treating them as a law of God from Scripture, he seems to be treating them as a saying. "You have heard" demonstrates Jesus' belief that this law no longer serves its original purpose.

Jesus is the one who sets the example for setting aside Biblical laws when they no longer serve God's will. You and I now understand how that law helped create a more-just society in its time and place. No more privilege. But in our time, and apparently in Jesus' time, an eye for an eye evoked notions of bloody revenge.

Jesus has another, deeper, greater purpose than equal punishment. The key is found in its rationale for calling us to turn the other cheek.

But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer.

The law of an eye for an eye was for fair justice for the victim. Jesus' call of non-resistance is out of love for the one whose heart is filled with evil.

Jesus is not trying to establish a new law of the land, but a principle by which his followers can change the world through changing what lies within us.

Jesus believes that people's hearts will be transformed when we refuse to return evil for evil.

Jesus demonstrated the truth and power of this strategy when he turned the other cheek while being lifted up onto the cross. He prayed not for justice, as he hung there, but for forgiveness for his killers. He sought to transform their hearts from hate to love. And on that day, as Jesus drew his last breath, that is exactly what happened to a Roman guard who, seeing the way in which he died, declared, "Truly this man was God's son!"

His heart changed, forever.

In this world we fight hard for justice and we should. We need to live in a land where all are treated equally. Thousands of years ago an "eye for an eye" was the beginning of that path.

It was a growing awareness that all people are of equal value in God's eyes.

But a land of equal justice is only the beginning. The law will never save humanity. It won't save our country. It won't bring harmony or peace, because the hearts of men will always find a way to denigrate, steal from and destroy their neighbor, no matter the laws you put down on the books.

India has more slaves than any other country in the world. They are taught that God made them this way. That God is punishing them for sins in another life. And that they are literally worth nothing.

First Presbyterian Church is working with Set Free Alliance to free these children. They have rescued over 22,000. They have set them free and brought them justice.

But they have given them so much more than physical freedom. There is a video in which the children are holding signs, "I was hate" "I was a slave" "I was mad at God" ... but now I am free ... now I love to play ... now I have friends ... now I am in love ... now I am excited ... now I love Jesus.

They have been taught that God loves them. That they are precious. That they are made in his image. And now they're not only free in body, but they are free in mind.

God calls us to be stewards – of our time and our money – we are to pledge them to God (but not turned into the church office!).

Yes, to bring justice. Yes, to bring peace. But more than anything, to bring the good news of the Gospel! These children have received it. Many of these children now have jobs and they have given back over \$300,000 to help save other children – to share the love of God.

Let our generosity, our passion, and our love be equal to that of these children.

They have discovered the love of God and there is no revenge in their hearts.

Do not resist an evil doer; and you, too, can change the world one heart at a time.