

**An Eye for an Eye**  
(Half Truths: Things You Only Thought Were in the Bible, Part 3)

Matthew 5:38-48

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First  
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I

When a person says, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,”  
nobody even flinches.

Nobody considers such imagery gruesome or upsetting.

Why not?

Two people fighting, slashing, punching until each removes an eye from the other’s eye socket or knocking out each other’s teeth?

It sounds like the stuff of horror movies.

I share this for some context—because I am going to read an excerpt from a letter that is very gruesome, very upsetting. It is a letter that was written by a woman who lived in Serbia. She was not Serbian, however, but was from Bosnia. She was not a Christian, but a Muslim.

She was an educated, cultured person whose life was totally transformed by the violence and conflict that engulfed that region of the world in the 1990s in the wake of the break up of Yugoslavia.

You will not find this easy to listen to—just as I do not find it easy to read.

But if we dare to consider what Jesus tells us about vengeance and revenge,  
then we must be realistic enough to ask what it means in our world as  
it is today.

This is her letter...

## II

*You ask me my name? So the entire world can witness my shame?  
Just write: female, Muslim, 35 years old, professor of literature. As  
for my new born son, I have simply given him the name Jihad [war].  
The first time I ever nursed him I said, "If you ever forget, may this  
milk curse you, so help me God.*

*The Serbians have taught me to hate. For the last two months, within  
me I have only hatred, no pain or bitterness...*

*Not so long ago I taught my students to love. But my Serbian  
neighbor's only son, Zoran, who was also my pupil, urinated in my  
mouth. While wild-eyed vagabonds were roaring with laughter,  
Zoran told me: "You are good for nothing, you stinking Muslim  
woman."*

*I don't recall if I heard a scream or felt a blow to my body. This  
colleague, a physics professor who yelled like a maniac at me, began  
to beat me continuously. My mouth filled with blood.*

*There is nothing strange here; I have been deadened to the pain but  
my soul...it hurts, oh how it hurts so much.*

She goes on to describe other atrocities she suffered.

She was beaten and kicked while pregnant.

She was made to watch a neighbor rape her mother, who died soon  
after.

Upon hearing the news, her father stood in silence for a day and  
hanged himself that night.

She endured her hair being cut off.

Then they carved an "S" into her hand (for Serbia), striped her, and  
put her out into the street.

At some point during the beatings—she is not sure when—she lost one of  
her eyes.

She writes,

*Leave the fine words of love for someone else. You may talk about Muhammad and Muslim goodness as much as you wish. Even if I lose another eye, I will walk blind and curse every Muslim who speaks of "forgiveness."*

Gandhi once said living by "an eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind."

Sometimes it feels like that is coming to pass...  
like we are living an "eye for an eye" world.

So let us now ask the question: Does the Bible instruct us to live by the code, "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth?"

### III

In spite of the title of this sermon series—  
"Things you only thought were in the Bible"—  
today's saying, "an eye for an eye," really is in the Bible.

In fact, you will find it three times—all in the Old Testament.

The first is Exodus 21:22-25.

This is part of the Law—and it deals with a particular situation:  
two men are fighting and injure a pregnant woman.

*When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no further harm follows, the one responsible shall be fined what the woman's husband demands, paying as much as the judges determine.*

*If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.*

This is the principle of *lex talionis*,  
retaliation in kind,

where the penalty is proportional to the offence.

In this case, a monetary fine for causing the miscarriage of a fetus, and *lex talionis* for injury or death to the woman.

In Leviticus 24:19-20 the principle is applied more generally:

*Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered.*

Another application is found in Deuteronomy 19:16-21. If someone brings a false witness against another, the liar shall be punished according to *lex talionis*, that is, he shall receive the same punishment that he intended to bring upon his brother.

*If the witness is a false witness, having testified falsely against another, then you shall do to the false witness just as the false witness had meant to do to the other...*

*Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.*

#### IV

Such a principle was an important step forward in the administration of justice in the public sphere.

*Lex talionis* is retaliation—but it is limited.

That is better than the unlimited kind.

Unlimited retaliation is what we saw among the ethnic groups of the former Yugoslavia,

between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda,  
and currently in South Sudan where rival ethnic groups have been engaged in a civil war since December 2013.

With unlimited retaliation, if someone knocks out one of my eyes, I am justified to knock out both of his.

If your enemy knocks out one of your teeth,  
you can knock out all of his teeth.

There is no limit placed on revenge and the end will be mutual self-destruction.

Limited retaliation is a step up from that.

If you poke out one of my eyes, I am entitled to poke out only one of yours—not two.

If you break one tooth in my mouth, I cannot break your jaw—only one tooth.

This means “get even”—but no more.

Do unto others just as they do unto you.

Obviously, capital punishment is based on this principle,  
and the three Old Testament passages I’ve cited about “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life,” are often given as supporting the practice of capital punishment.

## V

However, the biblical ethic moves beyond this step of limited retaliation to an ethic of love.

Listen again to what Jesus said in Matthew 5:38-41:

*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. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.*

Notice, first, how Jesus sets forth the principle of **limited love**.

In this case, retaliation depends on who the wrongdoer is.

If someone of your own ethnic or national group pokes out your eye,

you might possibly forgive him.

But if the wrongdoer is an enemy and not of your ethnic or national group,  
you could give them the dickens!

Common sense seemed to say, love and forgiveness are good in their place,  
but there have to be some constraints, some limits on this love and goodwill  
business—

and the proper place to draw the line is with your own family,  
your own race,  
or your own country.

This leaves, then, two standards:

one for your own people,  
and another for dealing with strangers, outsider, and foreigners.

This ethic underlies such movements as fascism, Nazism, and white  
supremacy.

The ethic Jesus advocates is the next step: **unlimited love.**

This is spelled out in Matthew 5:43-47:

*You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; ...For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?*

Here Jesus simply says that for citizens of his kingdom,

love must be the basis of all relationships,  
and this love must be applied universally—  
both to one’s race and nation  
and to those of other races and nations.

There must be no double-dealing,

no two-facedness,  
no partiality.

Hate has the same effect upon the personality whether its object is friend or foe.

Spiritual traffic cannot be halted at the artificial borders of race or nation.

## VI

Now this is just the kind of thing we expect to hear from somebody like Jesus:

love your enemy,  
turn the other cheek,  
don't resist an evildoer.

We expect Messiahs to talk that way.

We expect to hear the Son of God say that sort of thing.

We even expect a few exceptional people—  
people we label as “saints”—  
to say it.

But (tell the truth!) do any of us expect to hear this kind of talk...  
in Tehran or Kabul?

In Jerusalem or Damascus?

In Moscow or Washington, D.C.?

In Indianapolis or Portland?

We do not!

Not because we don't think Jesus said it—  
we know he did.

Not because we are unsure what Jesus meant—  
we know what he's telling us.

But it's like Mark Twain once said,

*“Most people are bothered by those passages of Scripture they do not understand, but the passages that bother me are those I do understand.”*

We understand all too well what Jesus requires of us,  
yet we put it into practice hardly at all.

We rationalize our way out of it, I think, with this excuse:

*“It’s just not practical—it just won’t work. Force is the only language some people understand—so we have to be realistic.”*

But Jesus didn’t advocate love and forgiveness because they are practical.

That’s entirely beside the point.

Look carefully at his examples.

Jesus doesn’t say to turn the other cheek because it will shame your enemy into being kinder.

Jesus doesn’t say to give away your cloak because that is the best way to get back your coat.

Jesus doesn’t say to walk the second mile because that will change your enemy into a nicer person.

He uses these three real-world situations that people of his day would have experienced in order to call on his followers not to passively acquiesce to evil but to engage in non-violent resistance to evil.

You have dignity as a human being, Jesus says.

Don’t let anyone take that away from you.

Don’t hang your head and accept servility.

Stand with your head held high as one of God’s precious children.

There is a better way, says Jesus:

Not the way of revenge.

Not the way of this world where violence is answered with ever increasing violence.

Not the way of “stand your ground” laws, that permit murder whenever a person feels vaguely threatened.

But the way that wins God’s kind of victory over violence and injustice.

We are to love and forgive because this is who God is and this is what God expects of God’s children.

We are to strive to be perfect in love,  
even as our heavenly Father is perfect in love.

Whatever situation you are in,  
what would it mean to reflect God’s generous love...  
in spite of the pressure and provocation...  
in spite of your own anger and frustration?

No, says Jesus, don’t resort to violence in order to resist evil.

Instead, in the words of Paul in Romans 12, **overcome evil with good.**

## VII

Perhaps you recall the story of Terry Waite.

Terry Waite was the ambassador sent by the Archbishop of Canterbury to negotiate the release of hostages,  
first in Iran, where he secured the release of seven hostages,  
then in Libya, where he got Moammar Gadhafi to release four hostages,  
and then later in Lebanon.

In January 1987, while seeking the release of Terry Anderson and Thomas Sutherland, Terry Waite himself was taken hostage.

He was held for nearly five years, the first four of which were spent in solitary confinement.

He was interrogated, beaten, and subjected to mock executions.

Still, he advocated that violence and hostage-taking and hostage-holding were not solutions to real problems or real injustice.

This belief was put to the test one day when a careless guard left his automatic weapon on the floor where Terry Waite could have reached it.

Probably he could have grabbed the gun and gotten away.

But he remembered what he had told his captors: “Even when you are in a tight corner, don’t use violence.”

Though the personal cost was high, Terry Waite chose to live by what he believed—the conviction that truth and integrity and commitment to non-violence will carry one through.

Later Terry Waite was heard to say,

*“I have come through this experience with three simple sentences engraved on my heart. For the years left in my life, I wish to enable the weak and powerless to be strong. I wish to enable the strong to be just. And I wish to enable the just, beyond everything, to be compassionate.”*

## VIII

May God, whose perfect love was revealed in Jesus Christ,  
 enable all of us,  
 for the years left in our lives,  
 to be strong, just, and compassionate in everything we do.

In an “eye for an eye” world, it is the only way.

Amen.

Source:

The original source for this sermon was the Rev. Charles W. Julian, Muncie, Indiana.