

Eye for Eye
7th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Mt 5:38-48)

Christians are different, and very distinctive in their morality. In the Old Testament religion of the Jews, God had already established a way of holiness that set His Chosen People apart from other nations for their wisdom and manner of life. But with the Christian teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, this uniqueness of God's People becomes even more pronounced. We are to live with the holiness, and righteousness, of God Himself: "*Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*" (Mt 5:48).

Jesus calls to mind the teaching of the Old Testament: "*You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for eye, a tooth for a tooth'*" (Mt 5:38). He is quoting part of the Law of Moses, given right after the Ten Commandments (Ex 21:24). This is one of many precepts governing Jewish society which would show how unique and different they were from other Gentile peoples. It enshrined in their legal system a principle of justice and fairness, which actually continues in all civilized societies to this day: namely, that the "punishment must fit the crime."

All too often, in ancient societies (and still today in many pagan societies) "justice" was arbitrary and subject to the will of the king or other government official. It was particularly subject to bribery, or personal vengeance. It was often harsh beyond measure, with no concern for the "rights of the accused." On the other hand, in the society established by God through the holy Law of Moses, the legal justice system was to be fair and impartial, following an objective standard determined by the crime committed. Thus, for instance, capital punishment was not to be meted out for a minor crime of theft or injury. On the other hand, capital punishment would be meted out for the serious crime of murder.¹ And this principle was to be applied equally, without regard to a person's prestige or social standing (cf. Ex 23:1-9). Justice in this sense, is "blind."

The Law of Moses affirms what we today call "human rights." This standard of justice and fairness is unique, and set God's Holy People apart from others. By their standard of justice, they are a holy nation: "*Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. What great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law which I set before you this day?*" (Dt 4:6-8).

¹ The Mosaic Law builds upon the earlier Covenant God established with Noah: "For your lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning... Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed" (Gn 9:5-6).

In no way does Christianity do away with the principles of the Law of Moses, including this famous rule: “*Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth.*” But Jesus adds something new that brings the principle to a divine perfection for his followers: “*I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other one as well. If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand over your cloak as well*” (Mt 5:39-40).

What God was establishing as a principle of legal justice for the Israelite society in the Law of Moses, Jesus elevates to a precept of spiritual perfection for Christians. That is to say, our dealings with others must be completely and absolutely free from vengeance, and the desire for retaliation. There must be no hatred, and anger must be properly restrained.

Contrary to what some commentators imply, Jesus is not abrogating or doing away with the earlier precept. In no way does Christianity call for society to “go easy” on criminals or let people “get away” with crime. Remember that Jesus prefaced the entire discourse on moral law by emphasizing, “*I have not come to abolish the law, or relax even the least letter; and woe to anyone who would try to do so!*” (cf. Mt 5:17-19). “*Eye for eye, tooth for tooth*” is as valid now as ever, as a fundamental principle by which the legal-justice system must operate.²

Thus, when Jesus teaches that we must “turn the other cheek,” this does *not* mean he is saying we must go easy on evil-doers and criminals, or be weak, or let people run over us. Jesus is not telling us to be passive and non-confrontative, or that we should not fight back and defend ourselves when attacked. This is made clear by Jesus himself when he is being falsely accused by the Sanhedrin at the time of his arrest. One of the high priest’s soldiers unjustly struck Jesus in the face (Jn 18:22), and Jesus (who said to “turn the other cheek” in the Sermon on the Mount) did not turn the other cheek! Instead he turned to face the officer squarely and confront him: “*If I have spoken wrongly, bear witness to the wrong; but if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?*” (Jn 18:23).

Jesus is teaching us to be *free of the evil* that someone would inflict on our soul by means of their unjust action. In normal human reactions, we use the valid principle of “eye for eye” to justify our retaliation against those who harm us: “you hurt me, I will hurt you.” It is this cycle of violence that Christianity opposes. It is this desire for vengeance that Christ forbids his followers in the Sermon on the Mount. No matter what evil someone else commits against us, we must not succumb to that evil ourselves, which happens so easily – like clockwork, in fact –

² “Legitimate public authority has the right and duty to inflict punishment proportionate to the gravity of the offense.” (*Catechism*, 2266).

when someone strikes us. We inevitably strike back, or desire to. It is that monster within us that Jesus would have us slay.

If we can do that – if we can overcome our own desire for vengeance and repayment – we will actually be in the correct spiritual place to confront and deal with the situation in a constructive and productive way. We will be able to stand in the strength of the truth as Jesus did at his trial.

The teaching of Jesus to “turn the other cheek” is in no way a teaching about weakness, complacency, or passivity in the face of injustice. Christians are not cowards. Instead, it is a powerful admonition not to be intimidated or afraid of evil. It is an exhortation to overcome fear, and a reminder that we possess the most important thing which is Beatitude, which cannot be taken or robbed from us by any criminal. We can only lose it by succumbing to evil ourselves, and *this alone* would be the worst thing that could ever happen to us.

“Turn the other cheek” in fact means having perfect Christ-like courage and strength, the righteousness of God in the presence of evil that enables us not to strike back in a knee-jerk way, but calmly confront and call out the bully as Christ did before the Sanhedrin.

There is something more important than a stolen jacket, or broken jawbone: it is the holiness of God in me which must not be compromised for any reason, least of all by the instigation of an evil-doer. Better to lose one’s shirt as well, be struck a second time, or have our money stolen, than compromise our soul by sinning through anger or hatred. Better to walk away and suffer human loss, if staying will cause us to sin and suffer eternal loss.

God is not unjust, and Jesus expects every society (beginning with the society of the family) to teach the principle of justice and fairness by imparting appropriate punishment for wrongdoing. But justice must be exercised by the competent authority, whether civil or familial, in a manner that is completely blind, impartial, and reasonable. For our part, as victims of injustice, we seek to rejoice in the fact that possibly we suffered for righteousness’ sake, and will be richly blessed by our God who can heal the wounds of sin as He glorifies His saints.

Blessed are the meek; blessed are the peacemakers; blessed are those who hunger for justice; blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness... The Kingdom of heaven is theirs.