

They Say, I Say - Part 4 “Revising the Ancient Law” Sunday, November 29, 2015

All scripture taken from the English Standard Version unless otherwise indicated

Intro:

The past couple of weeks, among all of the major events happening in the world, I have also been pondering the great “Starbucks Coffee scandal.” Starbucks, according to some, had the audacity to design a plain and red coloured coffee cup without any Christmas ornament on it. The result was that some Christians were offended, surprise and surprise!

For some in the world, the world had even gone too far, Starbucks was being just too disrespectful and even Donald Trump thought he would score a few points with Evangelicals and he piled on.

So, I wonder, “What would Jesus do about this grave offence to the Christian community at Christmastime?”

Let’s return to our series, “They Say, I Say”, and we will find out together.

Matthew 5:38-42

I found this week’s research to be very interesting and I didn’t need a whole lot of sources to help get us the gist of things. So, right up front I am going to give a lot of credit to William Barclay’s commentary on Matthew.

If you have been a Christian any length of time, some well meaning outsider or biblically illiterate Christian soul will try to convince you that the ancient Law, “An eye for an eye,” is still a good way to sort out conflict.

You obviously know by now, that Jesus had another thought or two on the subject of retaliation and then he adds some teaching on the financial equivalent of the same teaching.

I. The ancient Law

The eye for eye law, and we may wish to call it the “tit for tat” or “get even” law is formally and historically called “Lex Talionis” if you really want to impress your friends at a party.

Most of us would know its Old Testament manifestation and we should also know that it shows up in other ancient civilizations, too.

In all civilizations, the principle was this, “You hurt me and I hurt you!”

1. The Old Testament view

Let’s explore the Old Testament view of it.

“But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, ²⁴ eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵ burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.” (Exodus 21:23-25)

You can just imagine all the possible scenarios that might result in the need to invoke this law.

Let's try another one.

"If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, ²⁰ fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him."

(Leviticus 24:19-20)

And let's try one more.

"Your eye shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot." (Deuteronomy 19:21)

So far, I think this is all very clear and if you are a vengeful sort, so far so good, right?

2. Digging a little deeper

For those of you who are jumping to the conclusion that this is really archaic, a very low level of living, for the context, it was actually a very merciful and wise law and please let me explain!

i. A merciful law

It was actually a merciful law; it was a limiting of violence and vengeance.

Societies were tribal so let's envision a scenario where there is potentially a feud between the tribe of Cobden and another tribe in Eganville. If both communities went to the Cobden fair on a Saturday night and Bubba from Cobden and Cletus from Eganville got into a little "set to" over an old girlfriend or an argument over who shot the biggest buck, and Bubba's tooth got knocked out, without some rule of restraint, it would turn into an all out brawl, right? Yes, you have been to a few of those.

This law then would only allow for the Cobden group to go at Cletus and knock his tooth out! Anything more would be unlawful and both gangs would go home feeling satisfied by justice and free to nurse their hangovers.

ii. A responsibly administered law

The other thing that we need to know and you need to know if you have been prone to administering your own eye for eye justice, this law could only be administered by authority, the judiciary, a judge and not you personally!

Kind of takes the fun out of it, doesn't it? A lot of people would cool off before they got to the judge!

iii. A law that was never really carried out

This is the thing that was the real educational shocker for me, it, the tit for tat law, was never really carried out.

It was too hard to mete out justice in these cases because Bubba's tooth might have been a gold one and Cletus' tooth a rotten old tooth because his clan never brushed their teeth. So just like in our legal system, they needed to figure out value, pain, loss of time, humiliation if Bubba's girlfriend happened to be watching...

iv. A law that would not be carried out against your own people

And lastly, it was a law that would never be carried out against your own people.

“You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.” (Leviticus 19:18)

II. The fulfilled Ancient Law, Jesus’ version

We are going to find out now, that Jesus wants to really turn things on its ear and His call is to a very high standard as we encounter evil people.

“Do not resist the one who is evil!”

Let’s all agree that there is a whole lot of evil in this world and a whole lot of evil people operating all around us and at so many levels, this is just life. Jesus gives us three examples in His very clear message for us not to be retaliating.

1. The backhand

The first of the three lessons is the backhand one. I am not sure if you have ever had a right hand person slap you on the left cheek? You need to picture that one. And now Jesus is saying, “Turn then, and offer your right cheek as well.”

This would require that you turn the other cheek so the assailant can backhand you. Now we all need to understand that the backhand was a huge form of insult. It was a sign of total disrespect! The ancient Rabbis called this the “double insult.”

Now the early church were going to suffer a lot of backhands both literally and verbally and they were being prepared for it.

This is really challenging teaching because I have never been very good at offering the other cheek and trust it has been a challenge once or twice for you, too?

With respect to application, I am going to put this in the category of a personal attack and because of your faith and that for those who need to defend a third party, police and military, we will need to have a deeper look.

In any event, the clear application for us here today is that we are not to become offended over small and needless things. We are not especially to be insulted when no insult was intended.

“I never get asked, he is in my pew, the paint colour got changed and I wasn’t consulted...”

2. The shirt off your back

Next we get the instructions that if in an ancient lawsuit, someone got our tunic, we were to give them our cloak as well.

This requires some adaptation, because we do not have tunics or cloaks, am I right?

The tunic would be like a loggers long johns. It was the undergarment that even the poorest of men would have had a couple of changes of. But the cloak, the blanket, that would be a different story. Most folks would only have one and it served as your covering by day and your blanket by night. You would never say, "It looks like you slept in your clothes" because everyone did. Having a cloak was an inalienable right!

Remember Exodus 22:26-27? ***"If ever you take your neighbor's cloak in pledge, you shall return it to him before the sun goes down, ²⁷ for that is his only covering, and it is his cloak for his body; in what else shall he sleep? And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate."***

So Jesus is saying, "Give it up and live as if you have no personal rights."

Paul went on to tell Christians to stay out of the courts altogether! ***"To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?"*** (1 Corinthians 6:7)

3. Going out of your way

And then the third challenge was,

"And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles." (Matthew 5:41)

This is clearly a situation arising from military occupation and the seizing of property. It is the principle of "compelling." If an occupying military force historically and even in modern times was in need of anything, they just seconded it. This is a nice way of saying; they just took whatever they needed, food, horses and houses if they needed quartering.

This is probably what happened to Simon of Cyrene when he was told to bear Jesus' cross.

The limit under Roman law was probably just one mile and so the second mile was...that's right, the extra one.

This is very simple, when you are in the service of others, check your rights at the door and cheerfully serve. This is where unionized employees can get into spiritual greyishness when you are asked to do less than your best in a job action!

Let's review what we have learned so far.

Firstly, a Christian should not resent nor retaliate in the case of an insult! Secondly, a Christian should not needlessly, excessively stand upon legal rights and lastly, we need to make serving a higher priority and our rights the lower one.

III. The beggar and borrower principle

"Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you." (Matthew 5:42)

Now I will be the first to admit that our context is a whole lot removed from ancient Palestine as social services are relatively high functioning and money is too readily available to people that shouldn't be borrowing it in the first place, but there is still an important thing or two for us to learn.

1. The beggar principle

The first thing we need to do is dispense of this term because the term *beggar* carries a whole lot of baggage with it. Even the eye for an eye generation has a clear view of this truth.

“If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, ⁸but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be. ⁹Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart and you say, ‘The seventh year, the year of release is near,’ and your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the LORD against you, and you be guilty of sin. ¹⁰You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. ¹¹For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.’” (Deuteronomy 15:7-11)

One of the issues here is the seventh year. How it seems that we are mostly talking about situations of loans for the poor here. If you lived in ancient Israel, every seven years, your debtors were released from your debt so no doubt careful attention was given to dates of your agreements. So, the last thing that a shrewd businessperson would ever want to do was lend money getting close to the seventh year.

But according to the Word of God, the Old Covenant saint needed to be as generous in year seven as year one.

Here are five giving principles that the Rabbis had laid down and they are good for us, too!

i. Don't refuse those in need

Every giver has an internal conflict when they think unwise and foolish people might squander their giving.

The Word tells us, ***“He who befriends the poor lends to the Lord, and He will repay Him for his good deed.”*** (Proverbs 19:17)

We are to focus on the giving as an act of worship rather than focus on the recipient who might squander. It never hurts to be responsible, though, and make sure you are not being systematically duped. We never want to empower the wrong behaviour that will eventually hurt someone, either. This is not love!

ii. Don't refuse those in need and be sensitive about how you give

Treat the needy person with dignity and try to create a sense of that in the transaction. If you know someone needs something, you might say, “Is this a time when you might need a loan?” And use the loan language even though it might never be repaid. If the person was to respond, “I can't ever realistically expect to repay you,” you might say, “I have been really blessed this year and I have had times when I wasn't and I have found that when we take care of each other that you will be in a position to help someone in the future, so in a sense we are even if you just plan to be good to someone else later on! Would you let me bless you and please don't take away my chance to bless?”

iii. Give appropriately to the need

Once again, we have E.I. and so many other vehicles for public health but I wanted you to see the spirit of the discussion here. This is a very important principle. For the ancient giver, if a friend fell on hard times, you wouldn't just have given him his very basic needs, you would have given to him at a level that he does not suffer humiliation, the humiliation that poverty brings.

We have a bottom line reality here in the modern age and in a very prosperous country. Sometimes, present company included, we can entertain feelings of disdain and condescension with those that we perceive to get too much of the taxpayers' money.

We are being asked here to focus on our own hearts and give as if we were giving to the Lord Himself.

Conclusion:

As a final application today, your altar call is to apply all of today's teaching to our situation involving the Syrian refugees who will be here any day now. I obviously am not too concerned about your reaction to the red cups, but I am hopeful that you will be wise in all of your responses to the events of the past few weeks.