



## Sermon

### ***The Heart of the Law***

**Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Matthew 5:38-48**

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#### **Styptic Pencil**

My father had a styptic pencil. Do you know what that is? A styptic pencil is used to stop minor bleeds. When you are shaving with a blade, if you scrape too closely or cut the top off a bit of skin it bleeds and can be hard to stop and that results in blood on your collar. The styptic pencil has an astringent salt in it which stings but helps to stop the flow of blood. Anyway, his styptic pencil came under the brand name of "Portia." One evening we discussed this and pondered the choice of name. The next day at university, it dawned on me that it was a reference to Portia in Shakespeare's play, *The Merchant of Venice*. The story revolves around a man guaranteeing a loan for a friend and agreeing to give a pound of his own flesh if he failed to repay. Due to a commercial setback, the debt could not be repaid and the lender demanded his pound of flesh. Portia defended him in court by agreeing that the agreement demanded his flesh but did not allow for the spilling of blood. Her words were, "Shed thou no blood!" Hence the brand name of the styptic pencil.

Portia's interpretation of the law limited revenge and this was also the point of the "eye for an eye" law.

#### **Eye for an eye:**

It was a law of restraint not a requirement to exact the full penalty. The unrestrained tendency of revenge is to go to the extreme. It is this spiralling series of revenge attacks that the Old Testament law prevented. It commanded that the punishment for an action should not be disproportionate to the offence. No more than an eye, if an eye is lost. No more injury than the tooth which was knocked out.

Too often we think the Law was bad or harsh. Think back to what you heard read from Leviticus 19 today. I would put those provisions under four headings.

Generosity	Farmers were deliberately to leave some of harvest for the poor to come and get for themselves. You might remember in the story of Ruth, this was how Ruth got food from Boaz's land.
Honesty	Do not steal, lie, defraud, rob, deceive. Do not swear falsely.
Justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The casual labourer was to be paid immediately.</li><li>• Don't curse the deaf person who cannot hear you, or try to trip up the blind man.</li><li>• Judgements must be fair. Remember the statue of justice over the Old Bailey has the figure of Justice blindfolded. This is the point, justice should not favour people because they are poor nor because they are powerful. Courts should rule fairly.</li></ul>
Goodwill	Don't spread untruths about others. Don't endanger the lives of others. Don't hate them. Don't bear grudges or seek revenge.

And why were they to behave in these ways? He says it repeatedly, "Fear your God. I am the Lord." To fear God is to respect and honour him; to care about what he says and wants.

Each year the Corruptions Perception Index is published which rates and ranks countries of the world for how honest or corrupt they are:

7 Less Corrupt			6 Most Corrupt		
Rank	Score		Rank	Score	
1 <sup>st</sup>	90%	Denmark	176 <sup>th</sup>	16%	Yemen
2 <sup>nd</sup> =	87%	NZ, Finland	177 <sup>th</sup>	14%	Venezuela
4 <sup>th</sup>	84%	Norway	178=	13%	South Sudan, Syria
5 <sup>th</sup> =	83%	Singapore, Sweden	180 <sup>th</sup>	12%	Somalia
7 <sup>th</sup>	82%	Switzerland			

While it is heartening and perhaps surprising that NZ is second equal in the world we are not perfect by any means. On Thursday, a woman told me that she and her husband were in their ute which got caught in a flash flood in the heavy rain. The ute was washed off the road and up against a tree. It was filling with water but they managed to get out and climb into the tree. The next day they found the car had been ransacked, their valuables stolen, her credit card used for online gaming. It shocked her. It shocked me. I hope it shocked you. Why? Because it is just wrong. It seems even worse to hit someone when they are down like that. And our values come directly from the Law given to Moses by God. They come by way of Jesus, who is God, who gave those laws to Moses, who interpreted them in the Sermon on the Mount.

### Good Law

The Law of the Old Testament set up a just society. You know that Psalm 119 is the longest of the Psalms. It is devoted to praising the Law of God. In verse 32, it says, "I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free." It makes me think of a path on a Northland hillside. The ground is steeply sloping and uneven. There is a sheep track around the flank of the hill. Because the track is flat and even you can run along it. You are sure footed and fast. You know where to place your feet without finding footholds and picking your way. There is little danger of twisting an ankle. That is what the good law of God does for a believer. We can run in his ways because he has set our hearts free.

We are not more loving than God. God is love. I cannot say that I am love. And I am sorry but I would not say of any of us, "you are love." You may show love, but none of us is essentially love. We are all selfish to some extent and that selfishness is not loving our neighbour as ourselves.

### Jesus' Comment on the Law

When Jesus comments on the Law "eye for an eye" law, he is not saying absorb endless punishment from bullying opponents. Let's look at the examples he gives.

#### Compensation

The first is someone striking you on the right cheek. David Stern in the *Jewish New Testament Commentary* offers this insight. The Mishnah, a collection of Rabbinical teachings, writes:

"If anyone wounds his fellow, he becomes liable to compensate the injured party for five different aspects of the injury: damage, pain, healing, loss of time from work, and insult...."

You see Rabbinical rules said Jews were required to compensate those they insulted. When a first century Jew heard the expression, "Eye for an Eye," he would have thought of "litigation and compensation."

In most cultures a slap in the face is considered a great insult. When Christ is talking about turning the other cheek, He is not addressing the issue of self-defense in general, nor national policy, but He is addressing a debate of the day, namely, did the "eye for eye" command apply to being insulted? Christ made it very clear that individual believers who are insulted for His Kingdom must bear it.

#### Lawsuits

The second example relates to lawsuits. Jesus says it is better to suffer a minor loss than drag through the courts. He does not favour principled actions for small real issues.

When he was a lawyer, Abraham Lincoln was approached by a man who passionately insisted on bringing a suit for \$2.50 against an impoverished debtor. Lincoln tried to discourage him, but the man was bent on revenge. When he saw that the man would not be but off, Lincoln agreed to take the case and asked for a legal fee of \$10, which the plaintiff

paid. Lincoln then gave half the money to the defendant, who willingly confessed to the debt and paid the \$2.50! But even more amazing than Lincoln's ingenuous settlement was the fact that the irate plaintiff was satisfied with it.

#### Forced Service

The third instance Jesus gave was the right of the Roman army to demand that civilians carry their baggage for one mile. Of course, it was hated by the oppressed subjects. But Jesus offers a different response from the grudging compliance or possible violence men might offer.

Just give more. Yet even here, it is not unlimited. He does not say go as many miles as the soldier might wish you to walk. He instructs his followers to go two miles rather than one. This action changes everything.

Victor Frankl, an Austrian Jew, discovered when he was in concentration camp during the war, that giving more than demanded allowed him to be in control. Because he then gave freely, rather than being forced to act against his will, it changed his attitude to the persecution entirely. It allowed him to survive psychologically.

### God loves all mankind

Jesus continues with our attitude to enemies. He shows us that God has mercy on those who resist and oppose him. He does not withhold sun and rain from the disobedient. If we return to Portia for a moment, Shakespeare has her say:

The quality of mercy is not strained.  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

Jesus says show love to those we regard as enemies. Anyone can love their friends. That is not love but affection or self-interest. If we are to show the family likeness, then we must love those we don't agree with.

### Summarising the Law

The prophet Micah gave the famous verse: "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."<sup>1</sup>

Hillel was a famous Jewish Rabbi who was active between 30BC and 10AD. He was known for his gentleness and moderation in his interpretation of the Law. Asked to explain the entire Torah, he said, "Whatever is hateful to you, do not do it to your fellow. This is the whole Torah and the rest is commentary; go and learn it."<sup>2</sup> Hillel's summary is brilliant but it is a minimum standard.

Jesus flips this the other way around, "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."<sup>3</sup> By flipping from the negative to the positive, he moves us from a minimum focus to a maximum focus. Not how little can I do but how much can I do?

### Be perfect

The conclusion of this section is set in the future tense: You shall be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. It is about the process of sanctification – being made holy, perfect, whole, mature, complete, fit for purpose. Being perfect does not mean without sin. It is to be fit for purpose.

He says, 'As you develop in these things I have taught you, you will become like your heavenly Father.' What are we going to be perfect for? Jesus has told us already – we are designed to reflect the nature and character of God.

It is rather like climbing a mountain. If you look up the mountain, there is a long way to go. Yet if you look back, you realise that you have already ascended some distance. As we go on with Christ, we are changed to be more like him but there will always be more to come in this life.

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<sup>1</sup> Micah 6:8

<sup>2</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat 31a*

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 7:12