

Brief on Eye for an eye, turn the other cheek, and let go of thy cloak ¹

By Richard Joseph Michael Ibranyi

Eye for eye

“You have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” (Mt. 5:38)

Mt. 5:38. Eye for an eye: [RJMI: This law is just, as God himself ordained it (Ex. 21:24), (Lev. 24:20), (Deut. 19:21). What Jesus is condemning is acts of personal revenge, which are always sinful, and which never end the cycle of violence and thus lead to endless feuds because man kills not for justice and the common good but for personal revenge. For example, a man who rapes another man’s wife can be justly killed and that is not an act of personal revenge but an act of revenge based on justice. However, if the sons of the man who was justly killed strike back and kill the man whose wife was raped, then that is an act of personal revenge and thus unjust and sinful. It is murder!

Jesus is also condemning those who show no mercy when mercy is due because of sincere repentance. For example, the penalty for adultery is death, but Jesus had mercy on the adulterous woman and gave her a dispensation from the death penalty because of her sincere repentance and because those who condemned her were hypocrites who were committing the same or other mortal sins that were also worthy of death. (Jn. 8) So in this case Jesus is telling them that if you want an eye for an eye without mercy, then you will also lose an eye for an eye without mercy because of your sins of the same magnitude. And this law of mercy which mitigates the law of an eye for an eye was also in effect during the Old Covenant era when God forgave David’s adultery and murder and dispensed with the death penalty because of David’s sincere confession and repentance. However, till the day David died, God punished him in other ways because of these sins. So we see that even though the eye-for-an-eye law was in effect during the Old Covenant era, it was not always enforced. Likewise, the eye-for-an-eye law is still in force during the New Covenant era but under certain circumstances it should not be enforced and thus should be dispensed with.]

Turn the other cheek

“But I say to you not to resist evil: but if one strike thee on thy right cheek, turn to him also the other.” (Mt. 5:39)

Mt. 5:39. Not to resist evil: [RJMI: What is here commanded is a Christian patience under injuries and affronts and to be willing even to suffer still more rather than to indulge the desire of personal revenge. And many times when attacked, it is better to do nothing and defuse further conflict. However, as proved by other Bible verses, Jesus does not condemn acts of justified vengeance, such as magistrates punishing criminals, soldiers killing and wounding men in just wars, men defending their life or property or reputation, or parents punishing their children. For example, St. John the Baptist did not tell soldiers who were believers to leave the army and thus no longer fight in wars: “And the soldiers also asked him, saying: And what shall we do? And he said to them: Harass no man, neither calumniate any man, and be content with your pay.” (Lk. 3:14)

St. Paul says that God authorizes ministers of justice to punish criminals in an act of justice: “For he is God’s minister to thee, for good. But if thou do that which is evil, fear: for he beareth not the sword in vain. For he is God’s minister: an avenger to execute wrath upon him that doth evil.” (Rom. 13:4)

¹ RJMI’s Briefs are Long Commentaries contained in the end of *The Catholic Bible*, revised by RJMI.

In an act of justice and righteous revenge, Jesus tells Christians to kill his enemies and thus not turn the other cheek: “But as for those my enemies, who would not have me reign over them, bring them hither and kill them before me.” (Lk. 19:27)

In an act of justice and righteous revenge, God gives the Two Witnesses the authority and power to kill many people: “These have power to shut heaven that it rain not in the days of their prophecy; and they have power over waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with all plagues as often as they will.” (Apoc. 11:6)

In an act of justice and for the reputation of God, Jesus did not turn the other cheek but whipped the money changers out of the Temple: “And he found in the temple them that sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the changers of money sitting. And when he had made, as it were, a scourge of little cords, he drove them all out of the temple, the sheep also and the oxen; and the money of the changers he poured out, and the tables he overthrew.” (Jn. 2:14-15)

In an act of justice and righteous anger, Jesus did not turn the other cheek when struck but instead condemned the striker: “And when he had said these things, one of the servants standing by, gave Jesus a blow, saying: Answerest thou the high priest so? Jesus answered him: If I have spoken evil, give testimony of the evil; but if well, why strikest thou me?” (Jn. 18:22-23)

In an act of justice and righteous anger, St. Paul did not turn the other cheek when struck but instead condemned the striker: “And the high priest Ananias commanded them that stood by him to strike him [St. Paul] on the mouth. Then Paul said to him: God shall strike thee, thou whited wall. For sittest thou to judge me according to the law, and contrary to the law commandest me to be struck?” (Acts 23:1-3)

And regarding the meaning of “an eye for an eye” and “turn the other cheek,” St. Augustine says,

St. Augustine, *Sermon on the Mount*, 393-394: “56. Hence the Lord goes on to say: ‘Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: but I say unto you, that ye resist not evil; but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also...

“63. [However,] are we thus precluded from inflicting such punishment [requit] as avails for correction, and as compassion itself dictates; nor does it stand in the way of that course proposed, where one is prepared to endure more at the hand of him whom he wishes to set right. But no one is fit for inflicting this punishment except the man who, by the greatness of his love, has overcome that hatred wherewith those are wont to be inflamed who wish to avenge themselves. For it is not to be feared that parents would seem to hate a little son when, on committing an offence, he is beaten by them that he may not go on offending. And certainly the perfection of love is set before us by the imitation of God the Father himself when it is said in what follows: ‘Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which persecute you’; and yet it is said of him by the prophet, ‘For whom the Lord loveth he correcteth; yea, he scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.’ The Lord also says, ‘The servant that knows not his Lord’s will, and does things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes; but the servant that knows his Lord’s will, and does things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with many stripes.’ No more, therefore, is sought for, except that he should punish to whom, in the natural order of things, the power is given; and that he should punish with the same goodwill which a father has towards his little son, whom by reason of his youth he cannot yet hate. For from this source the most suitable example is drawn in order that it may be sufficiently manifest that sin can be punished in love rather than be left unpunished; so that one may wish him on whom he inflicts it not to be miserable by means of punishment, but to be happy by means of correction, yet be prepared, if need be, to endure with equanimity more injuries inflicted by him whom he wishes to be corrected, whether he may have the power of putting restraint upon him or not.

“64. But great and holy men, although they at the time knew excellently well that that death which separates the soul from the body is not to be dreaded, yet, in accordance with the sentiment of those who might fear it, punished some sins with death, both because the living were struck with a salutary fear, and because it was

not death itself that would injure those who were being punished with death, but sin, which might be increased if they continued to live. They did not judge rashly on whom God had bestowed such a power of judging. Hence it is that Elijah inflicted death on many, both with his own hand and by calling down fire from heaven; as was done also without rashness by many other great and godlike men, in the same spirit of concern for the good of humanity. And when the disciples had quoted an example from this Elias, mentioning to the Lord what had been done by him, in order that he might give to themselves also the power of calling down fire from heaven to consume those who would not show him hospitality, the Lord reproved in them, not the example of the holy prophet, but their ignorance in respect to taking vengeance, their knowledge being as yet elementary; perceiving that they did not in love desire correction, but in hatred desired revenge. Accordingly, after he had taught them what it was to love one's neighbour as oneself, and when the Holy Spirit had been poured out, whom, at the end of ten days after his ascension, he sent from above, as he had promised, there were not wanting such acts of vengeance, although much more rarely than in the Old Testament. For there, for the most part, as servants they were kept down by fear; but here mostly as free they were nourished by love. For at the words of the Apostle Peter also, Ananias and his wife, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles, fell down dead, and were not raised to life again, but buried.

“65. But if the heretics who are opposed to the Old Testament will not credit this book, let them contemplate the Apostle Paul, whose writings they read along with us, saying with respect to a certain sinner whom he delivered over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, ‘that the spirit may be saved.’ And if they will not here understand death (for perhaps it is uncertain), let them acknowledge that punishment [requital] of some kind or other was inflicted by the apostle through the instrumentality of Satan; and that he did this not in hatred, but in love, is made plain by that addition ‘that the spirit may be saved.’ Or let them notice what we say in those books to which they themselves attribute great authority, where it is written that the Apostle Thomas imprecated on a certain man, by whom he had been struck with the palm of the hand, the punishment of death in a very cruel form, while yet commending his soul to God, that it might be spared in the world to come,—whose hand, torn from the rest of his body after he had been killed by a lion, a dog brought to the table at which the apostle was feasting.”²

(See commentary on Rom. 12:19.)]

Let go of thy cloak also

“And if any man will sue thee at the law and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also.”
(Mt. 5:40)

Mt. 5:40. **Let him have thy cloak also:** [RJMI: If any man go to law to take away one of your possessions and wins his case and you have no recourse to appeal to a higher court, give him what he won; and if he won it unjustly, give him a little more to shame him. And in some cases, to avoid going to court and wasting your time and money, give him what he wants and even a little more if you must to avoid going to court. However, this does not mean that Catholics must let a thief steal without attempting to bring him to justice. Justice must be sought and thus the thief must be caught and punished and the goods returned if possible or else lawlessness and disorder will prevail. For what good is God's Seventh Commandment of “Thou shalt not steal” if it is not enforced. For example, when Ananias and Saphira lied to St. Peter by not giving him all they promised but held some back by deceit, God did not let them go and give back more of what they promised but in justice killed them instead. (Acts 5) If God had not killed them, then many would have lied to and

² b. 1, c. 19, 20.

deceived St. Peter and thus not given to the Church what they promised, vowed, or even owed (such as tithes) and thus the Church would eventually not be able to function unless justice intervened. And even worse, God and his ministers would be condoning and even promoting thieves and thus be partners in their sins and crimes. Thus God's ministers would blaspheme God, put their souls in the way of damnation, leave the thieves in damnation by not justly condemning and punishing them if possible, and encourage others to become thieves.]

For the glory of God; in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Michael, St. Joseph, Ss. Joachim and Anne, St. John the Baptist, the other angels and saints; and for the salvation of men

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