

Tit for Tat

Exodus 21:12-25

Whoever strikes a person mortally shall be put to death. If it was not premeditated, but came about by an act of God, then I will appoint for you a place to which the killer may flee. But if someone willfully attacks and kills another by treachery, you shall take the killer from my altar for execution. Whoever strikes father or mother shall be put to death. Whoever kidnaps a person, whether that person has been sold or is still held in possession, shall be put to death. Whoever curses father or mother shall be put to death. When individuals quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or fist so that the injured party, though not dead, is confined to bed, but recovers and walks around outside with the help of a staff, then the assailant shall be free of liability, except to pay for the loss of time, and to arrange for full recovery. When a slaveowner strikes a male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies immediately, the owner shall be punished. But if the slave survives a day or two, there is no punishment; for the slave is the owner's property.

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.

Matthew 6:7-15

“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

“Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

As people of faith, are we supposed to be forgiving- always willing to turn the other cheek and let bygones be bygones? Are we supposed to be people who show grace? Or, are we

supposed to be people who stand up for what is right- are we supposed to be people who draw lines in the sand when it comes to hurtful behavior, people who enforce consequences when folks step out of line? Are we supposed to be people of law, in other words?

Are we supposed to be people of law or Gospel- as Luther would have put it?



I have to say, as a pastor, this is one of the hardest questions we ask, and it's the one you come to me with the most. Just about everyone of us has someone in our lives who is, shall we say, a challenge. It's someone you work with, or someone in your family- and they are just so, so, so difficult. Sometimes it's hard to tell whether they're always meaning to or not, but they just always wind up hurting you- they make a comment here or there, or they don't show up when they're supposed to, or they do show up when they're not supposed to, and we wind up all twisted up over whether we're supposed to just be forgiving and let this stuff go, or whether no, it's not right to just lay down all the time. Yeah this other person is made in God's image, but we are, too, thank you very much. And maybe it's time that they realize if they want to keep hurting us there will be consequences to that.

Are we supposed to be forgiving or tough- this is one of the most common questions I get. And absolutely one of the hardest.



I am sorry to say that Scripture does not offer us an easy solution here. This tension between law and forgiveness, that is we're called to be tough and we're called to be forgiving-

well Scripture doesn't solve this dilemma for us, quite the contrary. Scripture only highlights the contrast, the tension.



Check out the texts for this morning. First up we've got the book of Exodus laying out what scholars refer to as the *lex talionis*, which literally means the law of retaliation. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

Now some of the examples they offer are a little extreme- like the punishment for kidnapping is death. I mean don't get me wrong, I'm not for kidnapping, but death seems a bit much. But aside from this, mostly what these examples are about is fairness. If a person commits murder- they shall be put to death. If two people fight and one is wounded such that they lose ability to function- the one who caused the damage will compensate the guy for his damages. The laws even extend to slaves, something no other ancient legal system does by the way- if a slave owner damages the eye or tooth of a slave, the slave gets to go free as a form of compensation.

Now, the saying "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" has the reputation for being kind of barbaric, but honestly, what's underneath it is simply the principle of fairness. If you damage someone, you shouldn't just get to get away with it, you should have to make up for the pain and the injury you've caused. This is the very definition of fairness. And when it comes to human beings- fairness is a BIG deal for us.

There's an experiment that economists use to remind themselves that human beings are complicated and aren't only motivated by money. It's a very simple game. It goes like this.

You have two people and 10 dollars to split. One person gets to divide up the money, and the other gets to decide whether they each get to have the split, or whether neither of them gets anything. So one person gets to divide the 10 dollars in any way they like. She could divide it up 50/50, so each of them would get 5 bucks. Or she could divide it so that she gets 9.99 and the other person gets one penny. But, and this is a big but. The other person gets to decide whether either of them get to have the money, however it's split, or whether no one gets to have anything.

Now for an economist this is a very simple problem. The rational thing for both people is for the divider to divide up the pot 9.99 cents and 1 cent. And the other person, the one who decides whether either of them get anything or not should take the penny. Why? Well, because something is better than nothing. Anything is better than nothing. And even though it's just one penny, they would still be better off with 1 penny than zero pennies.

But, when you actually run this experiment with live human beings- you can guess exactly what happens. This experiment has been tested for gender, race, class, and nationality, and across the board if the person dividing up the pot doesn't throw the other person AT LEAST 40 percent of the pot, the other person will say, "Oh yeah? Well I'd rather get NOTHING than to see you walk away with all that. It's not fair!" And that's the key word- fairness. What the experiment proves is that people actually value fairness more than they value money- even when you increase the amount in the pot, people are willing to walk away from a fairly serious amount of money if it means not feeling taken advantage of. Our sense of fairness is a BIG deal. And the law of God could not agree more. One of the most fundamental principles of the law is if someone hurts another- there must be a consequence, a punishment to make everyone come out fair and square.



But. (Why does there always have to be a 'but'?) As true as this is- it's equally true to say that Jesus is kinda big on forgiveness. The Lord's prayer, the most important prayer of our faith, the prayer he taught us to pray that we all say at least every Sunday- "give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Someone owes you a debt? Well by rights, by law, what's yours is yours. You should be able to collect it. Indeed it's the only fair thing to do. Heck if you look at it from the other perspective, if you loan money from someone, and you don't pay it back. What's the difference between that and stealing? Not much as far as I'm concerned.

But here ol' Jesus says, "Nope." Forgive the debt. Don't collect. Let it go. No consequences. No eye for an eye and all that. Just forgive. And it's not like this is just a suggestion either. If you didn't catch that last part he says, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you DON'T forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

So yeah, forgiveness, grace. I don't think there is anything more fundamental to the faith one person or community having the right to come down hard on another, and then, because of their faith, saying you know, just because we can do something, doesn't mean we should. October 2, 2006. Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Charles Roberts walked into the West Nickel School house, a one room school house, took the place hostage. He wound up shooting ten girls between the ages of 6 and 13, ten girls. He killed five before taking his own life.

And that community? One of the grandfather's of the murdered girl told the community they must not think evil of Roberts. Another man, a father of one of the girls agreed saying: "He too had a mother, a wife, and a soul, and now he's standing before a just God." That same day members of the Amish community visited Robert's widow- not to harass her, but to comfort her. More than thirty Amish showed up at his funeral to support the family, and they even established a charitable fund for Robert's children.

If anyone in the world had a right to be angry, to strike back, to ask for an eye for an eye- it was the family, the community of those little girls. And yet the only words they had were ones of grace, of forgiveness. It gives me chills.



So, according to Scripture- we're called to be people of fairness, of justice, which means people of the law, people who understand there are consequences for causing pain. And we're called to be people of forgiveness, of grace. Well fantastic. It's times like these you just want to pick up your Bible and just shake it yelling- "Which is it!?"

Well, the person who has helped me most with this question came as a bit of a surprise to me- he isn't a theologian, or a Biblical scholar; he's not even a believer as far as I know. He's a professor of Political Science at the University of Michigan, and his name is Robert Axelrod. A couple of decades ago Axelrod wrote what has become one of the most influential books in government, economics, and the social sciences called The Evolution of Cooperation. The great biologist Sir Richard Dawkins said, and I quote, "The world's leaders should all be locked up with this book and not released until they have read it."

The book summarizes the surprising discovery Axelrod made when he held a series of unusual tournaments. He invited well known people from a variety of disciplines, economics, math, and the sciences to create different strategies for playing what's called an iterated prisoner's dilemma. Without going into the details- it's a game that models conflict in real life.

Now everyone just assumes the winning strategy will be the one that is most ruthless, the most tricky, and the one willing to stab you in the back just to get ahead. But everyone was wrong. Way wrong.

The winning strategy was created by Anatol Rapoport, a mathematician at the University of Toronto. It was called Tit for Tat, and with four lines of code, it was far and away the simplest program entered. It was also one of the nicest. For instance Tit for Tat always started out cooperating with the other player, which Axelrod describes as being nice. (Incidentally, programs that weren't nice all finished at the bottom- all the top ten most effective strategies were nice.) But, while it's nice, Tit for Tat, is no door mat. It's provokable- it was willing to retaliate and hand out consequences if you crossed it. But then, even though it was always willing to retaliate, it's also just as willing to forgive. And after one round of retaliation, Tit for Tat will forgive the other player and go back to cooperating- which is all it really wants to do.

What shocked everyone is that this nice, provokable-yet-forgiving strategy turned out to be the most powerful, the most resilient and successful strategy over the long haul. And not only in this initial tournament, but when Axelrod published the results and held a second tournament- it won the second time as well- even when people had a chance to prepare! The programs that were mean and ruthless- well they often found success at first, but then most of them wound up finishing near the bottom.

Axelrod's profound discovery in *The Evolution of Cooperation* is that the question isn't WHETHER to be people of law and consequences OR people of forgiveness and grace. We have to be both- we have to be disciples of Moses and Jesus. No, the real question is WHEN to be tough and hand down a consequence, and WHEN to be forgiving.



And when people are able to do this- to be tough yet forgiving- amazing things can happen. In 1914 the English and the Germans were literally dug in against one another throughout Europe. The machine gun had brought about a new era of war more horrific than any seen before- trench warfare. But even in this environment- with two armies scrapping for every inch- even in this environment the English and the German soldiers found ways to create peace.

A lot of you have heard about the famous Christmas Truce where English and German soldiers spontaneously left the trenches to play soccer in the no man's land and sing *Stille Nacht*, or *Silent Night* together. I thought that story sounded a little cooked up, but it's absolutely true. And what's fascinating is that it turns out it's just the tip of the ice berg.

During the first several years of the war both the English and the German high command had a terrible problem. Their soldiers were shooting a lot of bullets and firing a lot of shells- but they weren't causing nearly enough casualties. Either they all had suddenly become nearsighted, or something else was going on.

Military historians say it was the latter, and they talk about the "live and let live" system that emerged in World War I. What was happening is that the groups of soldiers fighting one another in the trenches were close enough and small enough groups that after a while folks on

one side were able to recognize the folks on the other side and communicate with them. And these enemy soldiers- well they started to realize they could make life incredibly miserable for one another, or they could ease up a little and improve life for everyone. It started with meal times. Every meal time the quartermaster crew that carried up rations had to come forward to the men in the trenches. The enemy on the other side could make this extremely dangerous work, however both sides soon began to observe an unspoken truce during meal times allowing everyone to just sit and eat in peace.

And this live and let live behavior kept emerging over time, until some battalions actually would create these localized truce agreements. And when entire units were being punished for this kind of behavior, they learned to become more sneaky about it. So they would form agreements telling one another when and where they would fire their guns- so they could appear to be aggressive to please high command, but then the enemy could avoid the fire to preserve the peace which made life bearable for the boys in harm's way. In one instance the German high command sent more aggressive Prussian soldiers who refused to hold to the agreements, and they sent a barrage at the wrong time and actually hurt some people. An English officer reports that just as the English were about to really retaliate: "A brave German officer came out and shouted: 'We are very sorry about that; we hope no one was hurt. It is not our fault. It is that damned Prussian artillery.'" (p. 85) And it worked, the English backed down.

Now both sides took pains to prove they were provokable- if the other side seriously defected from the truce they could and would respond. The peace wasn't about weakness. But each side was also extremely forgiving, they allowed for mistakes like the Prussian artillery salvo, caring more about the live-and-let-live system than anything else.



But if peace can break out in the middle of trench warfare between the English and the Germans- it can happen anywhere. Even within our own bruised hearts. Even within our own fractured faith communities. Even within our own tired and broken families. So be forgiving. But stand your ground, too. It's not a question of whether to be forgiving or tough- but when. And when we do- those moments that we do like in World War I- maybe that's when we see "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." May it be so for us, too.

Amen.