

Did Jesus Contradict the “Eye for an Eye” Law?

By Peter Salemi

Jesus said, “But I say unto you.” Is this Jesus doing away with the law of God? Is Jesus contradicting the bible’s law of criminal justice?

Many cannot explain the plain scriptures that Jesus spoke in the Sermon on the Mount. On the *surface* it is a clear contradiction of the law of God that says, “And if *any* mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life,

“Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot,

“Burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.” (Exodus 21:23-25). Yet Jesus said,

“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.” (Matthew 5:38-39). Yes, as I said ON THE SURFACE it is a clear contradiction! BUT in actuality it is not! We must understand, the Bible is written in a certain way to make you study! Paul said, “*Study* to shew thyself approved unto God, a *workman* that needeth not to be ashamed, *rightly dividing the word of truth.*” (2 Tim 2:15). If the answers were given easily, there would be no work involved. Do you just give your child the answer when he or she asks, when they are doing their homework? Or do you tell them to search, read, and look for the answers as you guide them along the way?

The Bible is written in this way, “Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? *them that are* weaned from the milk, *and* drawn from the breasts.

“*For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little.*” (Isaiah 28:9-10). To understand what Jesus is teaching we must study all the scriptures pertaining to this subject so we can understand its true meaning.

The Context

What did Jesus mean when it comes to the “eye for an eye” law of the Bible? Notice the context:

“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.*” (Matthew 5:38-39). Jesus said, “resist not evil.” This means not to avenge yourself on that person. Gill’s Commentary says, “We must not render evil for evil, or repay him in the same way; see James 5:6.” Clarke’s Commentary also agrees, “Our Lord’s meaning is, ‘Do not repel one[’s] outrage by another.’” This is the reason why Jesus goes on to say, “*but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.*” Jesus was speaking about *personal vengeance*.

Now why did Jesus say, “Ye have heard that it hath been said” (v.38). Who was he referring to? Notice in the beginning of his teaching he said, “For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed *the righteousness* of the *scribes and Pharisees*, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:20). Jesus was dealing with the interpreters of the law! Jesus said the churches righteousness must “exceed” the righteousness of the scribes and the

Pharisees. The churches righteousness is of course the law of God (Romans 8:4). What is the righteousness of the scribes? Jesus said, “Then the *Pharisees and scribes* asked him, Why walk not thy disciples according to the *tradition of the elders*, but eat bread with unwashen hands? “He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with *their* lips, but their heart is far from me. “Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. “For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do. “And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition.”(Mark 7:5-9). Clearly Jesus was dealing with the interpretations of the Pharisees and scribes about the law of God, based on the traditions of men, and not God’s. As Isaiah said, “Thou meetest him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness, those that remember thee in thy [God’s] ways: behold, thou art wroth; *for we have sinned*: in those is continuance, and we shall be saved. “But we are all as an unclean thing, and all *our righteousnesses* [our ways] are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; *and our iniquities*, like the wind, have taken us away.” (Isaiah 64:5-6). The Pharisees practiced *their* righteousness, *their* ways and not God’s.

So when Jesus said, “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time” he would then quote the law, and give its true interpretation or widen the meaning of it, as the prophecy says, “he will magnify the law, and make it honourable.”(Isaiah 42:21).

Pharisees interpretation of “eye for an eye”

So how did the interpreters of the law explain this verse? Barnes Notes writes, “Christ finds no fault with the rule as applied to magistrates, and does not take upon himself to repeal it. But instead of confining it to magistrates, *the Jews had extended it to private conduct, and made it the rule by which to take revenge. They considered themselves justified by this rule to inflict the same injury on others that they had received.*” (Emphasis added). The rulers of the Jews interpreted to mean that you can take personal vengeance on a person justifying it by the “eye for an eye law.” But Jesus gives us its true meaning. Does the law conflict with Jesus teaching about personal vengeance? Absolutely not!

Personal Vengeance

God says, “If thou meet *thine enemy's* ox or his ass going astray, thou shalt surely bring it back to him again.

“If thou see the ass of him that *hateth thee* lying under his burden, and wouldest forbear to help him, thou shalt surely help with him.” (Ex 23:4-5). Did not Jesus say “love your enemies”? (Matt 5:44).

God again says, “*Thou shalt not avenge*, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I *am* the LORD.” (Lev 19:18).

Solomon said, “Say not thou, I will recompense evil;” (Proverbs 20:22). Clearly Jesus was giving the right interpretation of what the law says about personal vengeance, that we should not take any. The scribes and the Pharisees however interpreted it out of context.

The True meaning

Notice the context of the law, “If men strive, and hurt a woman with child, so that her fruit depart *from her*, and **yet no mischief follow**: he shall be surely punished, according as the woman's husband will lay upon him; **and he shall pay as the judges determine**.

“**And if any mischief follow**, then thou shalt give life for life,

“Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot,

“Burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.” (Ex 21:22-25). The context is “**and he shall pay as the judges determine**.” Who are the Judges?

James Strong & McClintock Cyclopedia under “Judge” says “(, shophet', usu. in the plur., , shophetim', **rulers rather than magistrates**, from different from, to try a cause, see Gesenius, s.v.; compare Bertholdt's Theolog. Journ. 7, 1; Werner, in Rudelbach's Zeitschr. 1844, 3, 17; Sept., N. Test. Act_13:20, and Josephus, Ant. 6, 5, 4, κ ρ ι τ α ῖ; in Dan_3:2-3, a diff. Chald. term is employed,” The Judges were basically **the government in Israel**. Only they can carry out the death penalty, or avenge someone concerning a crime.

“*Judges and officers shalt thou make thee in all thy gates, which the LORD thy God giveth thee, throughout thy tribes: and they shall judge the people with just judgment.*” (Deut 16:18).

“If there be a controversy between men, *and they come unto judgment, that the judges may judge them; then they shall justify the righteous, and condemn the wicked.*

“And it shall be, if the wicked man *be* worthy to be beaten, **that the judge shall cause him to lie down, and to be beaten before his face, according to his fault**, by a certain number.

“Forty stripes he may give him, *and not exceed*: lest, *if he should exceed, and beat him above these with many stripes, then thy brother should seem vile unto thee*” (Deut 25:1-3).

“*A divine sentence is in the lips of the king: his mouth transgresseth not in judgment.*” (Prov 16:10).

Some important points:

- Judges or rulers are appointed by the people
- The judges determine the punishment of the criminal according to the Law of God
- The officers of the law carry out the sentence.

The New Testament

The Apostles also agreed with the law of God. Peter wrote, “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: *whether it be to the king, as supreme;*

“Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him *for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well.*” (1 Peter 2:13-14). The church knew this is how God set up the role of government, to punish evil doers, and that vigilantism, and personal vengeance was against the law of God.

Notice what the Apostle Paul says, “*Recompense to no man evil for evil.* Provide things honest in the sight of all men.

“If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.

“Dearly beloved, *avenge not yourselves*, but *rather* give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance *is* mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.

“Therefore *if thine enemy hunger, feed him*; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.

“*Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.*” (Romans 12:17-21). Paul like Jesus taught to love your enemies, and do good to them who hate you, just as the Law of God says to do, and not to take personal vengeance on people.

But notice now Romans 13:1-4 *which continues from* Romans chapter 12, “Let every soul be subject unto the *higher powers*. For there is no power but of God: *the powers that be are ordained of God.*

“Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.

“For *rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil.* Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same:

“*For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.*” Do you see! No contradiction! The Law of God says only the government can execute justice on those who break the law. Only the government can administer the death penalty. Personal vengeance is never condoned in the Old and the New Testaments. So Jesus was not contradicting what the Law of God says, but giving the scriptures true meaning and interpretation. The eye for an eye law was only carried out by the government, and that personal vengeance was condemned in the Law of God, and we Christians must follow that same law as well.