

Sermon 15 February 2026 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'

Colossians 3:12-17 Matthew 5:38-48

There are two interesting observations about this passage, Firstly, it highlights a difference between the Old and the New Testaments. Secondly, it encapsulates what it means to be a Christian, a true, practising Christian.

Jesus begins by referring to a law deeply embedded in the Jewish religion. *'You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: "An eye for an eye, and a tooth from a tooth."'* Matthew 5:38. I quote from Exodus 21:24: *'If an eye is injured, injure the eye of the person who did it. If a tooth gets knocked out, knock out the tooth of the person who did it.'* Similarly, Leviticus: *'Anyone who injures another person must be dealt with according to the injury inflicted – fracture for fracture, eye for an eye, tooth for tooth. Whatever anyone who does to hurt another person must be paid back in kind.'*

At first glance, these principles, these laws, which were actually part of the Israel's legal system, appear to be encouraging revenge. But in reality they were about restraining revenge. In the very earliest days blood feuds were characteristic of tribal societies. If a member of one tribe injured a member of another tribe, that was a cue for every member of that tribe to wreak havoc on all members the tribe of the offender, and invariably the vengeance called for nothing short of death. So this law actually attempts to limit the fallout. Retribution should be carried out only on the offender. So in this context, this actually is a law of mercy.

However, these passages do reflect the Jewish understanding of God, which is reflected throughout the Old Testament. We do see a God, who at times, can be interpreted as being vengeful. Retribution is quite common. Let me give you an example: *'Look! The Lord's anger bursts out like a storm, a driving wind that swirls down on the heads of the wicked. The fierce anger of the Lord will not diminish until it has finished all his plans.'* Jeremiah 30:23.

Now, the point is this. You will not find a passage of a similar tenor in the New Testament. Jesus does bring a whole new take on this law. He introduces an approach which is cloaked in forgiveness. There is no retribution whatsoever. This approach really does contradict the Old Testament ethic of 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,' and undoubtedly reflects Jesus' approach to all relationships. Jesus preaches a message of unconditional love to all and sundry.

Forgiveness has to be the ultimate form of love. It is easy to love someone who is kind and loving to you; it is not so easy to love someone who offends or hurts you. In fact, it is very difficult. I know of very few people who are able to offer every single person the same level of kindness and love, no matter what the circumstances might be, no matter what offense that person might have committed. That is the mark of a true Christian. Let me share a story with you.

In November 1977 in a little suburb called Johnsonville, just out of Wellington, a six-year-old girl called Lynley Stewart went missing from her home. That evening scores of local residents and police mounted a massive search for her. Lynley's parents were devout Christians. Later that evening, Lynley's body was found underneath one of the classrooms at Johnsonville Primary School. She had been strangled. The next day, a 14-year-old boy was taken into custody. He lived only a few houses away from the Stewarts.

The little community seethed with anger towards the boy. Lynley's father, Keith, was as heartbroken as any father could be, but something quite profound happened in his heart. He had the strongest feeling that he had to go around to that boy's house and talk with the father.

The father of the boy responsible had himself become so grief-stricken by what his son had done, he had taken himself to bed feeling his heart would break. The next thing he knew, Keith Stewart was banging on his door. He expected the worst but he saw something in Keith's eyes that was altogether unexpected. Keith felt a divine push to go to the boy's father and offer a hand of forgiveness and prayer. In what was a most moving experience for them both, the two men embraced, Keith giving unconditional forgiveness and then praying for healing to occur.

The point is this, the two men were able to move on with their lives; they were able to begin living again. Years later, reflecting on what had happened, Keith was quite certain that this kind of attitude doesn't occur naturally, but has to be God-given.

With regards the boy himself, as a young man he embraced Christianity, married and had two children of his own.

Back to our gospel reading, Jesus goes on to say that we should love our enemies. What this really does is put a stamp on his command 'to turn the other cheek.' *'But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also.'* Matthew 5:39. It emphasises the message, it confirms the message. There is a famous story about Mahatma Gandhi. A British officer slapped him across the face during a confrontation. Gandhi didn't hit back. He didn't shout. He simply looked at the officer and said, 'You are free to slap me again if that is what you need to do.' The officer was stunned. The cycle of violence was broken – not through force but through dignity and restraint. It should be noted that Gandhi was an avid believer in Jesus' ethic of non-retaliation. It was Gandhi who said, *'An eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind.'*

However, it's important to understand this – Jesus is not asking us to love our so-called enemies in the same way that we love our nearest and dearest. That's probably taking it just a step too far! The Greek word used for loving those really close to us is *storge*. That is not used here. The Greek word used here is *agape*, which is not so much a feeling of the heart as an attitude. It means that no matter how someone might treat us, we will regard them with benevolence and goodwill. And of course, we don't take revenge, we turn the other cheek. Remember this, you don't overcome evil by matching it; you overcome evil by refusing to let it shape you. Let me conclude with another appropriate story.

In 2015 a young man named Dylann opened fire while attending a Bible study group in South Carolina, killing nine people. Felicia Sanders survived by pretending to be dead, but lost her 26-year-old son. At a bond hearing, she told Dylann, 'You have killed some of the most beautiful people I know. Every fibre in my body hurts, and I will never be the same, but I forgive you.'

How powerful is that. What incredible strength that must have taken. What incredible faith she must possess in order to be able to do that. But then forgiveness is so very powerful, and that is why forgiveness has to be the ultimate form of love.

One last point. Jesus said in verse 45, *'But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven.'* Matthew 5:44-45. In other words, that is what God is like – loving and forgiving, not vengeful and seeking retribution.

I conclude with words from our first reading: *'Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony.'* Colossians 3:13-14.