

Online Bible Study Discussion Starters
Gleaning from Leviticus, Number 10
July 3, 2007

Leviticus 24:17-22 (NRSV)

- 17. Anyone who kills a human being shall be put to death.**
- 18. Anyone who kills an animal shall make restitution for it, life for life.**
- 19. Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return:**
- 20. fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered.**
- 21. One who kills an animal shall make restitution for it; but one who kills a human being shall be put to death.**
- 22. You shall have one law for the alien and for the citizen: for I am the LORD your God.**

Here we have the Lex Talionis, the “Law of Retribution”: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life. Within its ancient context, this one-for-one ruling set limits on the tradition of revenge. In the spirit of the macho tradition, Cain’s descendent Lamech boasts to his wives that he has killed a man for wounding him, a young man for striking him (Genesis 4). Lamech concludes his boast: “If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.” The numbers are not literal but mean greatly (7-fold) and without any limits of reason or moral restraint (77-fold). Revenge in the style of Lamech is taken without regard for proportion to the harm sustained and is a source of great pride. Revenge became the mark of honor. The Law of Retribution sought to set legal limits upon revenge and so bring it under control. Retribution was to be a matter of law, not a matter of personal prowess and family honor.

Of course, over time, the Law of Retribution shifted in the public mind to become a matter, not of restraint, but of revenge. No longer was it used in the cause of mercy and fairness but, rather, in the rejection of mercy and fairness. So, we hear Jesus speak against it:

"You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. (Matthew 5:38-42)

And even more directly contrary to the spirit of Lamech’s boast:

Then Peter approaching asked [Jesus], "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus answered, "I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times. (Matthew 18:21,22)

Jesus seeks to turn the tide of human endeavor and honor from revenge to reconciliation. His idea has never been popular because people feel shame when wrong or harm is done to them, and the macho reaction to shame is to attack the other to gain vindication and restore pride. Much of the history of our world is written in macho scripts of revenge, which people call “honor.” Lamech is the Bible’s archetypal believer in “shock and awe.” Jesus wants to make peacemaking as pervasive and as persistent as revenge has been.

It is a serious and tragic mistake to misconstrue forgiveness as the mere excusing or ignoring of wrongs done. Forgiveness is an act of healing. It is reconciling not dismissive. For this reason, forgiveness can be painful and difficult as it seeks to right the relationship. If we take Jesus’ teaching about turning the other cheek too literally and simplistically, we substitute one more rule for the sense it was supposed to make. The idea is to work out the harm done and the rift caused for the good of the relationship rather than for the satisfaction of wounded pride and its desire for revenge.