

**Bethel AME Church**  
**Insights from the Rabbis 2**  
**Class Notes 4/25/21**

We have been looking at the topic of crime and punishment, and in particular the saying “An eye for an eye.” We saw that it could be understood in at least two different ways. One would be to see it simply as speaking about punishment for an offense, and we saw that its actual purpose was to place limits on what kind of penalty was assessed for a crime. The punishment must be fair, it must fit the crime, not go beyond it out of a sense of seeking revenge. But we also saw that the phrase could be understood in a more positive sense of speaking to the need for restitution, making things right with someone you have harmed. We saw in our discussion of the idea of repentance in Judaism that it included this requirement to restore whatever you had taken from the other person. You don’t just say you’re sorry: you make up for their loss, even going beyond what is strictly just to try to achieve reconciliation. The rabbis clearly interpret “an eye for an eye” this way, and so does Jesus.

One of the issues this raises in my mind is the hotly debated topic of reparations for slavery in America. On the one hand, the idea creates a logical and logistical nightmare. Who exactly should get reparations? What kind of restitution might actually compensate people for centuries of oppression and abuse? Money is what people usually talk about, but how much? And would money really make adequate restitution? I don’t have the answer to these difficult questions. But I understand why people are raising the issue. Whatever solution proposed to these questions would be inadequate in terms of actual compensation. But, just doing something would be a symbolic step of great importance.

Perhaps one question that might be raised would be: how could the Church do this? America as a whole might not be willing, but the Church should really look at its own responsibility for supporting and defending slavery (and later Jim Crow) and think about what it could do to make up for it, not just giving its shirt (which is the bare minimum it owes) but its cloak as well. What would it mean for the Church to make reparations for their mistreatment of African Americans? How could that be done? What might satisfy a sense of the need for justice, your own sense of justice?

Summary of main points made by class members in the discussion of this topic. Real reparations would include:

- National repentance, acknowledgment of the wrongs done
- Eradication of structural racism: changing discriminatory laws
- A Free Loan Society for descendents of slaves
- Clean up of toxic waste dumpsites in poor districts
- Support for voting rights and genuine police reform
- Provision for mental health services to address issues arising from stress of racism and poverty
- Education about the dehumanization of people of color and its effects on society

#### 4. Jesus and the Fence Around the Law

Jesus' creative remarks about "an eye for an eye" come as part of a series of commentaries and reflections on Torah in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:17-48). Each one has the same literary structure: "You have heard it said...but I say to you..." That structure has been misunderstood to mean that Jesus is teaching something brand new, contradicting what has come before. Jesus is seen as the new Moses, ascending the mountain to proclaim a revised "Christian" version of Torah. Jesus' sayings here have regularly been referred to as "antitheses," or opposites, as if Jesus were substituting his own ideas for those of Torah. That simply is not the case. As we have seen, I don't think Jesus was saying there is anything wrong with the "eye for an eye" principle in Torah, anymore than he is saying there is something wrong with its prohibition of murder and adultery. Amy-Jill Levine says that Jesus' pronouncements would better be characterized as "extensions" of the Law, developments of its meaning and purpose. Jesus is teaching like a rabbi, showing his disciples how to interpret and apply the Law. I want to look a little more closely at the rest of the passage to see what in fact Jesus is doing.

The context for Jesus' remarks about specific laws begins with a strong affirmation of the Law and the Prophets, of their eternal value and the importance of teaching them faithfully and following them carefully (vv. 17-20). Jesus is making it clear that in no way is he overturning Torah. He has come to show people how to live it. Jesus is not concerned here to avoid that great bogeyman of Protestant theology, "works righteousness." He encourages it. Christian commentators on this passage usually jump quickly to statements from Paul and Luther to override what Jesus says and essentially nullify it, a practice which Jesus actually condemns in this passage (v. 19)! Jesus calls for righteousness greater than that of the Pharisees, a high standard indeed. Jesus did not criticize the Pharisees because they were "legalistic." Jesus' criticism of them was that they were not sufficiently observant of the Law (Matt. 15:6; 23:23). But as we have seen in both the example of the righteous Joseph and in Jesus' comments on the "eye for an eye" principle, the Law cannot be reduced to isolated commandments. Jesus calls Israel to be faithful to the whole of its covenant teaching and in so doing be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

##### a. Crimes of Passion (Matt. 5:21-30)

How can one live out the Law and the Prophets faithfully? Jesus gives some examples. The first two are murder and adultery, which I am calling crimes of passion, because as I have indicated, these are more than private sins. They are public crimes. These examples make it clear that Jesus is far from overturning the Law. Instead, he is intensifying it. He is doing what the rabbis call for at the very beginning of *Pirkei Avot*: "Make a fence for the Torah" (*m. Avot* 1:1). That is, create a protective barrier that will make it more difficult for people to come close to breaking a law. Don't let people play the game of seeing how close they can get to it without technically violating one of its teachings. The rabbis made fences around a lot, but not all, of the laws, and sometimes put up fences around the fences. If you aren't supposed to work or engage in commerce on Shabbat, then you should avoid even picking up a tool or handling money for any reason. That is why synagogues don't take an offering on Shabbat. The most extreme example we have seen of

this is the prohibition of consuming any meat and milk product together, as a way of keeping from violating the commandment not to cook a kid goat in its mother's milk.

Christians have done the same thing. If the Bible prohibits drunkenness, then we will ban all alcohol use. If Jesus prohibited lustful thoughts, then we will ban going to movies or dances. If gambling is wrong then we will prohibit playing cards of any sort. Those same Christians, of course, spent a lot of time sermonizing against the legalism of the Jews and thinking themselves superior to those who follow a religion full of all sorts of rules.