

“Do Not Resist an Evil Person”

Leviticus 24:17-20; Psalm 69:22-28; Matthew 5:38-48

Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • April 22, 2018 (BSCC)

Dear Congregation of Christ: This morning, I start with a few quotes: (1) from the conservative National Association of Evangelicals, “Ezekiel 33 says, ‘I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live.’ ... If someone who is wicked repents, that person’s former wickedness will not bring condemnation.” (2) from the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., “The use of the death penalty tends to brutalize the society that condones it. Capital punishment is an expression of vengeance which contradicts the justice of God on the cross.” (3) from Pope Francis, “[Capital punishment is an offence] against the inviolability of life and the dignity of the human person, which contradicts God’s plan for man and society . . . [and] does not render justice to the victims, but rather fosters vengeance.”

In our text today, “an eye for an eye” is often posited as contradictory to Jesus’ command, “*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*” Those who oppose capital punishment, like the churches cited above, use this passage, saying that Jesus has abrogated the “eye for an eye” law. Almost all mainline Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians and Methodists oppose the death penalty. Others use this passage to advocate pacifism: We need to disarm and refuse to go to war. Still others say Jesus is teaching passive non-resistance, even when you’re attacked.

This is how this passage is often misunderstood, and the teachings cited above do not conform with Scriptures. So this is what we will meditate upon this morning in three points: first, **“An Eye for an Eye”**; second, **Do Not Resist all Evil?**; and third, **Love, Not Vengeance.**

“An Eye for an Eye”

Again, Jesus introduces this passage by saying, “*You have heard that it was said.*” Then he quotes Leviticus 24:19–20, “*If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him.*” This is called *lex talionis* or the “law of retaliation.” *Talionis* is a Latin word that means “a punishment equal to the injury sustained.” This law is cited in Islam’s Qur’an, and the Shiite sect practices this law literally. A person caught stealing will cost him an arm.

To the modern mind, this law seems to be cruel, vindictive and inhumane, because of gruesome images of punishment by gouging an eye and cutting off an arm. But this is far from what the Law of Moses teaches, because this law does two things. First, it provides the judge a guide for punishment that is proportional or commensurate with the crime. For example, a sentence of 10 years in prison for jaywalking or shoplifting would be excessive. It also provides for restorative penalty. If a man steals his neighbor’s cow, he must pay back two cows, restoring the one he stole. The other cow is for punitive restoration: the thief loses what his neighbor also lost. Today, we call these punitive damages.

The second thing that “an eye for an eye” judgment does is it prevents revenge or vendetta. An example of excessive revenge is when the wicked Lamech boasted, *“I have killed a man for striking me,”* adding that his revenge is 77 times (Gen 4:23-24). Revenge says, “Your three teeth for my one tooth,” then, “Your jaw for my three teeth.” So this law prevents the spiral of violence.

Therefore, this law protects both victim and criminal. It restores what the victim lost. It protects society from rampant crime. But it also protects the criminal from excessive punishment and revenge. It purges evil from society and instills the fear of the LORD (Deu 19:20-21).

This is why the Psalms, Jesus and the apostles support this law, and not only this law, but the whole Law of Moses. The law is good, just and righteous. The Law of Moses was established by God to order the civic life of his people Israel. But today, God’s people is not America, or Israel, or Europe, or any other nation. God’s nation is the church in all nations, so the church is not tasked by God to implement civil laws. The church has jurisdiction only over God’s kingdom and its laws as stated in his commandments in Scriptures.

This is the first main teaching in this passage: no excessive punishment for evildoers. But he follows it up with another teaching.

Do Not Resist all Evil?

Jesus says, *“Do not resist an evil person.”* Then Jesus gives a few examples. If anyone strikes you in the face, let him strike you a second time, maybe even a third, a fourth . . . If you lost \$1,000 in a civil case, offer your accuser another \$1,000. He tells the Jews to carry a Roman soldier’s load, not only for the required one mile, but for two miles. Does this mean that we should not offer any resistance to those who do us spiritual or physical harm? The Bible says no.

James, as well as Peter, both command Christians, *“Resist the devil, and he will flee from you”* (Jas 4:7; 1 Pet 5:9). We are to resist not only the devil, but the devil’s henchmen. Peter resisted Elymas the magician who opposed the preaching of the gospel, *“You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?”* (Acts 13:10). Peter did not hesitate to expose Elymas as a tool of the devil.

Paul did not hesitate to resist false teachers who were troubling the churches. He named names: Hymenaeus and Alexander in 1 Timothy 1:20, and Philetus in 2 Timothy 2:17. He exposed them directly to warn the churches of their false and divisive teachings. This is why he says, *“watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them”* (Rom 16:17). Paul even publicly rebuked fellow-apostle Peter because Peter refused to sit down and eat with Gentiles (Gal 2:11).

But resistance is not commanded only against those who would do us spiritual harm. It is Biblical for us to defend ourselves, our families, and our neighbors from physical harm. Throughout its history, Israel defended itself from foreign invaders. The LORD assured Joshua, *“No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life”* (Jos 1:5). The judges, led by Samuel, Gideon, Othniel and Samson, resisted Israel’s enemies. David, anointed by God as king, defended Israel against the Philistines. However, when Israel worshiped idol-gods, they were not able to resist or withstand their enemies as a sign of God’s judgment against them (Jgs 2:14).

God commands Israel, *“Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death”* (Lev 24:17). In Deuteronomy 13:5, God commands the death penalty even for false prophets, saying, *“So you shall purge the evil from your midst.”* In the New Testament, Paul also affirms the right of the civil authorities to resist and purge evil in the land. He says in Romans 13:1–4, *“For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God . . . For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad . . . But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.”*

Bearing the “sword” implies that the civil authorities can punish with the death penalty. Those who cite Ezekiel 33:11 against the death penalty misinterpret the Scriptures. God says, *“I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.”* Obviously, God does not gloat when he sends the wicked to eternal hell. But it doesn’t mean that he will wink at evildoers and forgive them of their wicked ways without true repentance. Rather, God is like a human judge who grieves when he sends a convicted murderer to death.

Nor does the death penalty violate the dignity of a person as an image of God. Right after the Flood, God’s eternal covenant with Noah – valid till the end of the world – included the death penalty, *“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image”* (Gen 9:6). What is the death penalty for? The reason is absolutely contrary to those who oppose the death penalty because a person is the image of God. It is precisely because the person who is murdered is the image of God that the murderer must be punished with death! Murder is a heinous offense against God the image-maker himself.

Others oppose the death penalty because some might be wrongly convicted and only “the poor” and “the black” are executed. But due process is not perfect; there are bound to be mistakes. Ron Gleason, pastor of a Presbyterian Church in L.A., argues, “It does not make the case that it is far better to allow thousands of convicted murderers to live simply because of the outside chance that one innocent man might be put to death.” In a 2014 study, only 117 out of 7,482 death sentences handed down from 1973 to 2004 or 1.6 percent were overturned.¹

Still others say that death row inmates might later repent of their crimes and so are forgiven by Christ. So they should not be executed. This again is a most erroneous misunderstanding of the Bible. Being saved after conviction is not a passport to life or to freedom. God and society demands justice, and justice for murder demands the death penalty. Even the thief who was saved while hanging on the cross admitted that his punishment was just (Luke 23:41). Rather, this man, like all others who repented of their sin and believed in Christ before they were executed, went to heaven rejoicing.

Another argument against capital punishment has to do with Jesus’ next command, *“Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.”*

¹ Michael McLaughlin, “Shocking Number of Innocent People Sentenced to Death, Study Finds,” 12/6/2017. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/04/28/innocent-death-penalty-study_n_5228854.html. Accessed 4/21/2018.

Love, Not Vengeance

But before he gave this command, Jesus quoted God's commandment in Leviticus 19:18, "*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" This law exposes the Pharisees' self-serving twisting of God's law, "*You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.*" In fact, several verses later in Leviticus 19, God commands Israel, "*You shall love [the stranger] as yourself*" (verse 34).

Love your enemies? This is one of the most daunting commands we find in Scriptures. It runs against human nature. When we are wronged, we want to retaliate. This is why Jesus' previous command not to resist an evil person is hard to accept and obey. He doesn't want us to fight back when others insult us, or falsely accuse us in court. We consider these a blow to our honor. We are to walk the second mile for others, so to speak. We are to give generously to those who are truly in need, especially to our brothers and sisters in Christ. This is why the church must be active in ministries of mercy in the community.

However, some Bible texts approve of hating one's enemies. The LORD promised in Deuteronomy 30:7 to "*put all these curses on your foes and enemies who persecuted you*" (Deut 30:7). We read in Psalm 11:5, "*[The LORD] hates the wicked and the one who loves violence.*" David prays in Psalm 139:21, "*Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD?*" When unbelievers read Psalm 109:9–10, they ask, "What kind of God is this?": "*May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow! May his children wander about and beg, seeking food far from the ruins they inhabit!*" These are just a small sampling of texts that says God and his people hate his wicked enemies.

Psalm 69, a psalm of David which we read, has some of the most horrible prayers of imprecations against the wicked. To "imprecate" means "to pray evil against" or "to invoke curse upon." In verse 23, he prays, "*Let their eyes be darkened, so that they cannot see, and make their loins tremble continually.*" He even prays for their eternal damnation, "*Let them be blotted out of the book of the living*" (verse 28).

Do these psalms contradict the teachings of the New Testament? They cannot, because even these psalms are quoted in the New Testament. Psalm 69 has many verses that point forward to Christ's sufferings, especially on the cross. "I thirst" comes from verse 3. Verses 19-20 speaks about the mockery and scorn that he will suffer. When the Roman soldiers gave him sour wine to drink, it was a fulfillment of verse 21, "*for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.*"

Psalm 69 is also quoted in the New Testament to show Christians how we are to live, and that Christ is our model. He exhorts us, "*Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written: 'The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me' [Psa 69:9]. For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*" (Rom 15:2-4).

These imprecations are against the unrepentant enemies of God. Paul describes these unrepentant sinners after God gives them over to their wickedness, "*They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice . . . envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips,*

slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless” (Rom 1:28-31). Robert Godfrey, former President of Westminster Seminary in California, summarizes, “What we do need always to remember is that imprecations apply to those who intransigently and unrepentantly persevere in evil against God. They apply especially to those who have known the covenant of God and have knowingly spurned it.”

Their punishment in this world when they are sent to prison or death is merely a foretaste of their eternal punishment. Therefore, Christians must wait for Judgment Day when all the wicked people of the world will be thrown into the eternal fire. In the Book of Revelation, we read that saints and angels in heaven rejoice in their destruction, because their sufferings, persecution and martyrdom will finally be vindicated (Rev 18:19-20). The unbelieving “*peoples and multitudes and nations and languages*” who are God’s enemies and who worship Satan and his Antichrist will be destroyed (Rev 17:15).

This is why we read in Revelation 6:10-11 that the souls of believers in heaven are praying to God, “*O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?*” But what God’s answer? “*Rest a little longer*” until all the elect are saved. We are to wait for God to complete his salvation plan, because only after this plan is complete will he exact vengeance on the wicked, unrepentant people of the world. This is why Paul commands us never to avenge ourselves, because vengeance is the Lord’s. And we are to show love to our enemies (Rom 12:19-21).

Therefore, we cannot pray that our personal enemies – who offend us, falsely accuse us, or even rob us or strike us – be blind, and their children be orphans and beggars. For we do not know if God has chosen them to be saved. Rather, we must pray for their salvation. However, sinners must be warned that God’s patience toward them will one day run out.

Dear friends, when you think of your sufferings at the hands of your enemies, think of Jesus. Look to him. We turn the other cheek, because he turned the other cheek when he was struck, and offered his back for flogging. We give generously, because he gave generously, including his very own life for you. We go the extra mile, because he went the extra mile all the way to the cross. We love our enemies, because when we were his enemies, when we hated him, despised him, mocked him, and blasphemed his name, he loved us and made us his friends in return.

Jesus says that we are to forego of our rights for the sake of the kingdom of God and for others in need. In so doing, we will show to the world that we are God’s children, because in Christ, God showed his utmost love and compassion even to evildoers like us who were formerly his enemies.

Jesus is holy and perfect, just as his Father is holy and perfect. So he must administer justice and exact vengeance upon his unrepentant enemies. As we wait for his return on Judgment Day, let us pray for our enemies, that God will also show his love, grace and mercy to them. Amen.