An Eye for an Eye and a Tooth for a Tooth

> “[23] But if *any* harm follows, then you shall give life for life, [24] eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, [25] burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.
>
> (Exodus 21:23-24)

We read the above commandment from God in the Old Testament, and then the below from the Lord Jesus Christ in the New Testament during the Sermon on the Mount.

> “[38] “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ [39] But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. [40] If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have *your* cloak also. [41] And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. [42] Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.
>
> (Matthew 5:38-42)

Clearly, God has changed his mind, right?

This is yet another example where understanding the cultural and historical context is important. What is the Spirit of the Law in the Old Testament? Did God think and command that the best way to react to something was in an equal and opposite reaction?

Actually, the "eye for an eye" commandment in the Old Testament was an UPGRADE for humankind at the time. In those days, people were not satisfied by simply retaking what was stolen from them, or killing the person who killed their brother. They took their revenge in terribly brutal ways. For example, in the time of Jacob, his daughter Dinah was raped by Shechem the Hivite. In order to obtain revenge for their sister, Simeon and Levi (her brothers) killed all the males of the land including Shechem. They were not satisfied simply killing Shechem, but they exacted a personal act of revenge. Given this context, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth would have been merciful.

Now how do we reconcile this with the Lord's commandment in the New Testament?

If we understand the Spirit of the Law in the Old Testament, we can see that the Spirit of the Law in the New Testament is the same. It has not changed. It is mercy. But mercy in the Old Testament looked a little bit different than mercy in the New Testament - not because God has changed, or the definition of mercy has changed; but because by then God had led His Creation to grow out of its barbaric behavior. The people had grown in righteousness. God gradually teaches His children the way to righteousness.

To be clear, it is not that the people had at first misunderstood or misinterpreted God's commandment, but it's that God was giving His commandment (i.e. mercy) in a way that they could digest.

St Paul calls this "milk and solid food." A parent gives his infant milk, but when the infant grows, he is given solid food. Is it because the parent has changed his mind about what is best for his child? No, but rather it is because the child has grown and is now able to digest solid food. The goal of the parent in both cases is the nutrition and health of their child.

> "I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal." (1 Cor 3:2-3)

> "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child." (Hebrews 5:12-13)

Sources:

- Chapter 5 in *Floods, Plagues, Wars... and a Loving God?* by Fr Gabriel Wissa.
- Lesson 2.10 of ACTS 3023 for a Comprehensive Undertaking of an Eye for an Eye

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