

Matthew 5:38-48 (The Message)

Every country and kingdom
has its laws and standards
and the kingdom of heaven
is no exception.

In Matthew's gospel,
we see Jesus coming
to fulfill the law
and make it perfect.

And so from the vantage point
of a mountain,
Jesus gives a sermon
that teaches that
the old laws were good,
but they did not go
far enough.

Jesus first talks about
the Lex Talionis law,
the law of tit for tat
that states an eye for an eye,
a tooth for a tooth.

Now this law
was not unique
to the Israelites.

It was a well-accepted law
throughout all ancient
eastern cultures.

At first this law

seems violent and insensitive.
If a man accidentally
wounds another,
it sounds as if he will be
liable to the same
violence in return.

In Exodus 2 we read,
"If any harm follows
then you shall give
life for life
, eye for eye,
tooth for tooth,
hand for hand,
foot for foot,
burn for burn,
wound for wound,
stripe for stripe."

Sounds awful, doesn't it?

But in fact
this law is a law of mercy.
In earlier days
the injury or loss of life
of one member
of a tribe or clan
would have meant
that every member
of that clan or tribe
would attack every member
of the perpetrator's clan
in vengeance.

Many innocent lives

would be taken,
homes destroyed,
goods stolen.

And so, this law is merciful
because it limits
the vengeance
to one person,
and limits the punishment
to no more than
that which was first done
by the perpetrator.

Under the Mosaic law,
the eye for eye
was the standard,
but not usually the practice.
Often a monetary amount
was usually assigned
equal to that of the injury
and losses it accrued,
and the guilty party
was required to pay it.

So, now that we understand
what this lex talionis means,
we can throw it
out the window
because Jesus declares
it null and void,
and offers a new law
that is even harder.

The law of non-resentment
and non retaliation.

For instance, Jesus says
if anyone hits us on one cheek,
we are to offer the other.
Now there are two levels
of meanings to this.

The first is that we are
too tolerate the hit
and offer the offender
a chance to do it again.
The second level is that
we are to offer ourselves
to insult.

You see, if someone
is facing you and hits you
right handed,
the only way to hit
your other cheek
is to hit you on the back swing,
and strike your other cheek
with the back of the hand.
This kind of hit
was considered
the most highly offensive
insult possible
in the near east.

Jesus also says
that if someone
takes our tunic,
and note that most Jews
owned 2 or so,
we are to offer our cloak –

the over cloth worn
in ancient times
during the day
and slept in at night
like a blanket.

Now, this was interesting
because every Jew
would have known that
the right to keep one's cloak
was declared in scripture.

In Exodus we find,
"If ever you take
your neighbor's garment,
his cloak, in pledge,
you shall restore it to him
before the sun goes down;
for that is his only covering,
it is his mantle
for his body;
in what else
shall he sleep?"

So Jesus is talking about
generosity **and** lack of retaliation.

Listen to the Message
translation of this portion
of our gospel.

"Here's another old saying
that deserves a second look:
'Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.
' Is that going

to get us anywhere?
Here's what I propose:
'Don't hit back at all.

If someone strikes you,
stand there and take it.
If someone drags you
into court and sues
for the shirt off your back,
giftwrap your best coat
and make a present of it.
And if someone takes
unfair advantage of you,
use the occasion
to practice the servant life.
No more tit-for-tat stuff.
Live generously.

Live generously.
Usually we hear the phrase
live well
and give generously.

What does it mean
to live generously,
abiding by the law
Jesus lays down?

It means not responding
to insult or injury.
It means giving
and serving in the face
of unkindness.
It means not demanding
the vengeance due us

and responding instead
in compassion and mercy.

I was thinking about this
as my family and I
watched American Idol
this week.

I love this show,
But know it is full
of sensationalism.

The contestants get
tired and cranky and often
act out on their worst impulses.

I don't know if you watch the show –
I can tell you that
the Graves household is addicted.

We've watched almost
every season and
we enjoy meeting
the contestants
when they first audition on air
and then enjoy following them
throughout the whole contest.

This year we all agreed
on our favorite –
a 15 year old boy
named JC.

Now JC is young,
they just this year

allowed contestants
this young to audition.

When JC walked in the room,
Short and soft
big eyed and big boned
with bangs and freckles
he's the kind of sweet
good natured kid
that often gets chosen last
for sports teams in gymn class
and to be honest,
we all expected him to bomb.

Instead we were blown away
by his voice –
smooth and sweet as butter,
like a young Frank Sinatra
He calmly sang his way
into our hearts
with his vocals
and his sweet demeanor.

Because of his velvety voice,
We've nicknamed him butter
and we were excited to see
he made it into Hollywood week
and through the
first round of cuts.

Then came the group competition day.
This is a bit of a
free for all when contestants –
there are 100 of them –
must form groups,

choose a song,
choreograph it
and have it down
in less than 24 hours.

They have to work together
And place their trust
in the group,
Because they perform
as a group but are judged
and cut individually.

There is always drama.
But Butter had found
a group of other young singers
and they got to work.

But late in the game,
the other singers
threw him out.

They told him that his style
Would be better elsewhere
and although it was
very late, they told him
to find a different group.

Not one expressed
any concern about
where he would
find another group
at this late hour.

And without a group,
He would have to go home.

Now, I was
very impressed by Butter.
He didn't get mad
or demand his rights.
He told them good luck
and left.

Now he did find his parents
and cry just a little –
which made my girls
cry too –
but then he started
looking and found
a group with heart
who welcomed him in.

He only had a few hours
to learn the new song,
which he had never heard,
but the next day
he sang it well enough
and made it through
to the next round.

When the judges asked him
about his trouble with the lyrics,
he said he was sorry,
but he hadn't had
a lot of time
to learn them.

That was all he said
until the judges pressed
to know more.

He calmly said that
he had been asked
to leave his first group
because they thought
he had a style
that would fit better
with another group.

But he didn't whine,
And he didn't elaborate,
and he didn't accuse
and he didn't call them
out for being
heartless and uncaring.

In fact,
he was so compassionate
that I felt as proud of him
as if I was his parent.

And I wondered
if I would have been
able to resist exposing
the first group
as the mercenaries
that they were.

Later, one of the
first group's young singers
Another favorite of mine
with a deep, deep voice
said to the judges
that he would never
forgive himself

for not sticking up
for Butter.

Later that deep voiced
Singer was found
Back stage sobbing
Not because he'd been cut
From the competition,
Because he had made it through,
But because he was
so disappointed in himself
for how he had acted toward young butter.

He had learned
something new and disturbing
about himself
and he resolved
to be better.

Now I ask you,
had Butter been vindictive
and accusatory
would the first group
have responded
with shame and penance?

No, they would have
become angry
and felt justified
as they defended themselves.

There's nothing
like an attack
to make us abandon
our conscience

and take up the fight.
We always feel better
When we are full of righteous indignation,
Even when we're in the wrong.

But Butter responded in compassion
And they were chagrined
At their behavior,
And I would guess
forever changed.

I would say that Butter
was modeling kingdom ethics.
And although it is a small thing
in the scheme of life,
it is the small things
that define us day by day.

Henrietta Mears says that
Jesus new law is life changing.
"If we let this rule
operate in our lives,
it will change all our
personal relations,
heal our social wounds,
solve every dispute
between nations,
yes, set the whole world
in order.

The root of this law
is kindness...
Has anyone yet fathomed
the depth of (Jesus' new law?)

It is true, the law is easy to read:
But it is hard to do. "

May God find us
Worthy to the task
And able to live up to
This law's standards of mercy
And compassion.
Amen.