

Retributive justice

By [Steve Pankey](#)

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Thousands of years of hindsight make it easy to smugly look back on the Torah and think, “thank God we’re not like them.” This [Sunday’s Gospel](#) lesson is nearly impossible to not read through the lens of the Ghandi saying, “An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.” As more and more states do away with capital punishment for violent offenders, we start to feel better and better about living in America in the 21st century, believing that retributive justice only further exacerbates the cycle of violence. I’m thankful for the folks over at Luther Seminary who in their weekly [Sermon Brainwave Podcast](#) discussed this very topic.

While we get all self-satisfied with our place in history, assured of just how much smarter we are than those silly ancients, we assume that the law of “an eye for an eye” or “a tooth for a tooth” was intended to create a system of revenge. Instead, according to the Luther podcast, the intent behind these rules was actually to *limit* the cycle of violence. This was accomplished in two ways.

First, it put a limit on what sort of retribution was allowed. If you poke out my eye, I’m not allowed to kill you. If you break my nose, I can’t permanently maim you. The response to violence could only meet and never exceed the violence initially acted upon a victim.

Secondly, there was (and it should be noted, continues to be) a real fear that too much mercy—a world without corporal consequences for violence—would mean that violent criminals could not be stopped.

I know that there are studies that suggest that this is not the case, and it is abundantly clear that Jesus was not worried about too much mercy. But to assume that these ancient Jews were too stupid to understand what we smart moderns do is foolish and dangerous. The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus’ attempt to turn the upside-down world right-side-up. He did it not by contradicting the Torah, but by expanding it to its logical conclusions. As we prepare to preach on it for the third straight week, preachers would do well to remember that we’ve still not figured out

the mind of God—and remain just as flawed and just as confused as were the Hebrews in the Sinai Desert and the disciples who followed Jesus.

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