

February 19, 2017  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
Matthew 5:38-48

### Talion and Telos

Say a friend of yours borrows your bike, goes for a ride, and while they were using it one of the tires gets punctured. Maybe it was a complete accident: they rolled over an invisible shard. Or maybe they could have been more careful; they didn't have to ride behind a pickup truck piled high with nails and tacks. However it happened, the tire is not in the shape it was when they borrowed the bike, which is now unusable. So it would be poor form for your friend to return your bike, just like that, with a busted-up tire. They should return it with a repaired tire, which they should pay for. But while you might think twice before lending them something again, you wouldn't tell them never to ask borrow anything from you—or anyone else—ever again. And you wouldn't demand they never ride a bike again. Nor would you break their legs. All of these go a step beyond, and more. All these exceed compensation, reparation, basic fairness. They're not fair consequences—and they're not fair, even if your friend hasn't just borrowed your bike, but stolen it. (In which case they're not a very good friend.) But even then: even if it's not an accident or negligence, but theft, those other consequences (no more biking ever, broken legs...) go beyond a basic premise of justice: that the punishment fit the crime.

In Latin, that premise is called *lex talionis*, or the “law of *talion*.” You may know that word, *talion*, maybe because you saw it in the sermon title, one of two “t” words listed there. Both are from languages other than English, and together are the topic of today's sermon. First, *talion*: the law of *talion* shows up in the Bible in various locations, particularly in the Old Testament. It's there amidst many other commandments, which are given to the people of Israel after their escape from slavery in Egypt. Once they are free, their given laws to guide them in their new state, because freedom doesn't mean just do anything. We heard some of these laws in today's first reading: don't lie, don't steal; aid the poor and the alien (not beings from outer space, the immigrant and refugee). These are key principles for free and fair societies of old—and of now. And also this law: make the punishment fit the crime, which in the Old Testament is often rendered in this way: “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.”

Admittedly, this may sound less like fitting punishment and more like irreversible disfigurement. But for ancient cultures, for cultures in which violence was the norm and the only justice was vigilante, for ancient, violent cultures unused to free and fair governing, the law of *talion* actually functioned as a kind of protection; it was a way of limiting punishment: only a tooth for a tooth—not the whole mouth. Loss of an eye is bad, but don't kill someone who causes it. I was trying to get at the way *talion* can function helpfully with that bike tire story. When someone breaks something of yours, or takes something of yours, you don't lock them up in jail and throw away the key. Not according to the law of *talion*. But I think often, maybe even and especially nowadays, when people invoke the law of *talion* they are less concerned with justice, than retaliation. The law of *talion* becomes payback, in the darkest sense of the term. It's not an opportunity for reparation, but permanent ruination.

The law of *talion* also shows up in the “new” section of the Bible, in the New Testament—which is still quite old. The law of *talion* shows up Matthew's gospel, in the Sermon on the Mount—which is also God's guidance for how to live as free people. In today's excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus quotes the law of *talion*—and then Jesus says

something else about how to respond to offense. Jesus takes *talion* a step farther—but not in the way we often do, making the punishment exceed the crime. Jesus offers a consequence that exceeds the crime on a whole other level. Jesus says do not pay back a punch with a punch; do not answer violence with violence; do not resist evil with evil. To be clear, Jesus is not telling those who are abused that they should just accept it. Jesus is saying that the way to resist evil is with active love, by opposing violence with its opposite, by refusing to strike back, by giving above and beyond, by going the extra mile, by taking a step beyond that changes the terms, moves towards a complete and different end.

This is *telos*, the other “t-word” for today, *telos*, a Greek word that means a step beyond, a different end, an ultimate aim. *Telos* is a powerful and complex and almost undefinable word, which I’ll describe with a story, an incredible story that I heard on the radio.<sup>1</sup> It took place in Washington DC, on a warm summer evening, a small group—friends, couples, one who was there with their 14 year old daughter—all were gathered at a backyard dinner table. They were toasting family and friendship, enjoying the fine weather. The night felt special.

It was getting late, about 10 pm, when it happened. One of the guests at the party, a man named Michael Rabdou says: “I was standing beside my wife. And I just saw this arm with a long barrel gun come between us. And then it just got really quiet.” The hand belonged to a man, medium height, in clean, high-end sweats. The man held the gun to the head of Micheal’s friend, Christina, and then to the head of Michael’s wife. And then the man said “Give me your money.” He kept repeating it. “Give me your money, or I’m going to start effing shooting.” Nobody had any money. They started talking to the man, trying to dissuade him. They tried guilt, “Your mother...What would your mother think?” He said “I don’t have an effing mother.” It all felt headed to a very bad end. Someone was going to get hurt.

And then a woman at the table, Christina, the one who first had the gun pointed at her head, said, “You know, we’re here celebrating. Why don’t you have a glass of wine?” And the look on the man’s face changed. He tasted the wine. He reached down for the cheese. He put the gun in his pocket. Then he said something that no one expected. He said, “I think I’ve come to the wrong place.”

For a moment, they all sat there, in the summer night. And then the man said something even stranger, he said, “Can I get a hug?” He got one. And then he wanted a group hug. Michael Rabdou says, “I can’t tell you how strange that was. But we all did come around him and hug him. And he said, he was sorry. And he walked out, with a glass of wine, he walked out the gate. It was like a miracle.” All the group could do was run into the house and cry in gratitude. Later, they found the empty wine glass, carefully placed on the sidewalk by the alley.

“That old law about ‘an eye for an eye’... Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, paraphrasing Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, “That old law about ‘an eye for an eye’ leaves everybody blind. The time is always right to do the right thing.” As Jesus does, taking a step beyond *talion* to *telos*, the word with which I’ll end the sermon—the word that ends today’s excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount, it ends with *telos*. The translation we heard rendered it as “perfect,” “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect...” But this is not as an impossible commandment; it’s not law, it’s gospel. It’s a pronouncement, a promise, for *telos* doesn’t just mean perfect, it also means completed, fulfilled, ultimate, finished. It is Jesus’ victorious cry from the cross, a pronouncement that ends in *telos*: “It is finished, it is fulfilled, it is perfected.” In Jesus, in those who obey the word of Christ, the love of God has reached perfection.

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<sup>1</sup> “Flip the Script” Invisibilia podcast, NPR, first aired on July 15, 2016. See <http://www.npr.org/programs/invisibilia/485603559/flip-the-script>