**“…Eye For Eye…”—Matthew 5:11 Vs. Exodus 21:23-25**

**QUESTION**

Jesus’ words in Matt 5:38-40 sounds like a reversal of the previous “…eye for eye, tooth for tooth…” law of Exodus 21, yet Jesus said he had not come to abolish the Law. What does this all mean?

**ANSWER**

No, Christ certainly did not reverse the previous laws, in fact, Christ wasn’t even modifying them. What Christ was doing was correcting some misapplications of *(or some commands of)* the Law.

**CHRIST HAD NO INTENTION TO REVERSE THE PREVIOUS LAW**

First, just before stating his commands *(many don’t realize they are commands [Mat 5:19])*, Christ was careful to plainly point out that he did not come to abolish the Law and that the Law will continue until the end of the age [Mat 5:17-18].

Christ was sort of saying, “Don’t misunderstand the commands that I am about to give you as an abolishment of the Law of Moses, but in fact a fulfillment of them”.

Christ knew that we could misunderstand the implications of his commands, and so took that measure to guard against it.

**CHRIST WASN’T EVEN MODIFYING THE PREVIOUS LAWS\***

Someone may say that though Christ did not reverse the previous laws, he certainly modified them. Well, he didn’t. To see this, we need to understand the whole Law itself and not just a part of the Law. Consider the following commands of the Law:

“‘Do not **hate** your brother **in your heart**. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt.   
“‘Do not seek **revenge** or bear **a grudge** against one of your people but **love your neighbor** as yourself. I am Yahweh.”   
[Lev 19:17-18]

If you reflect on these commands, you will see that what Jesus was teaching, was not a reversal of the Law, but in truth a fulfillment of the Law. Jesus was teaching the Law as it ought to have been practiced

* You are not to obey the Law externally only but in and from your heart.
* You are not to seek revenge or bear a grudge, that would mean you are to forgive those who offend you.
* You are to love your enemy, since your neighbor could be your enemy.

Surprisingly, people often forget that the command to love one’s neighbor was not formulated by Jesus of Nazareth but is a command of the Law. Jesus only emphasized and elaborated a command others had skillfully rejected. They skillfully rejected it by defining what neighbor meant in exclusion of one’s enemies. Jesus corrected this [Luk 10:29-37].

The question then could be, “Was the Law contradicting itself?” It says love your neighbor and don’t seek revenge but it also says “you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.” [Exo 21:23-25]—is this not a contradiction?

No, it isn’t.

**IT IS NOT A CONTRADICTION**

The “…eye for eye…” law acknowledges your right, while the “Do not seek revenge…” law tells you what God would want.

Vengeance is your right, and God acknowledges it, the Law of “an eye for an eye” regulates it—the Law regulates vengeance. The spirit of the regulation is: Don’t take more than has been taken from you.

Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that this regulation does not command vengeance but only regulates it.

The fact that the Law teaches elsewhere, “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge” means that, although vengeance is your right, and exercising your God given right is not a sin, the more righteous thing to do and what would *greatly*please Yahweh, is that you forgive.

The “…eye for eye…” command is sort of saying that if you must take revenge, for whatever reason, *(perhaps because it is your right)* you must ensure that it is just and fair—take only what is taken from you and no more. Don’t merely act out of anger or greed claiming more than was taken from you.

Therefore, to take an eye for an eye is righteous and it is what the Pharisees taught— “Hate your enemies”—nevertheless, it is not really pleasing to God and so such a righteousness will not get you into God’s Kingdom. You can’t enter if you are not pleasing to God.

**A SIMILAR MATTER WITH DIVORCE**

In the same way, the people were permitted to divorce [Mat 19:8], but God hated it [Mal 2:16]. Even before Malachi, if you read the Law closely, you would see that God did not really want divorce.

Therefore, though divorce was legal and a husband’s right, it was an offence to God.

Now, the Kingdom of God belongs to God, it is not your right. Therefore, no reasonable person would think that he would divorce, or seek revenge, doing what God hates, and still be allowed into God’s kingdom.

Really, you had better be sure you are doing what He really likes and not just what is your right or is legal.

**CONCLUSION**

There is no contradiction between the Law of Moses and what Christ taught, and indeed, Christ was not abolishing the Law of Moses by his commands. Christ did not reverse or modify the previous commands, he only taught and applied them more correctly as they ought to have always been.