

## CHAPTER 2

# My Neighbor and I: A Motto for Life

Over thousands of years, human civilizations have had various ideas of justice and different standards of behavior. We also have some sayings that sum up our own perspective on life. It may be something like "might makes right", "I'm all right, Jack", "look out for number one", "honesty is the best policy", or "put others first."

It is possible to see how ethics has developed and evolved in history and its relationship to the level of civilization.

### Law of the jungle

The essence of this principle is very simple. You steal my chicken, I'll steal your cow. You kill my slave, I'll kill your son. You give me a black eye, I'll break your nose. The thought process is basically "how can I get ahead of the other person?" Such retaliation easily gets out of control and initiates a chain reaction of responses which can continue for generations. Verbal insults escalate until they are backed up with violence. This is often the origin of the notorious blood feuds between families and nations that never seem to end. Such escalations happen partly out of revenge and partly to teach the other a

lesson. However, this kind of behavior doesn't solve the problem and no lessons are really learned.

Although we may call this the law of the jungle, and attribute it to primitive cultures, a remarkable number of people in the 21st century still abide by this very rule. They persecute those who offend them. Nations at war have often tried to deter or punish their enemies through a massive escalation of violence. How can a society ever progress when this is the code of conduct of its members?



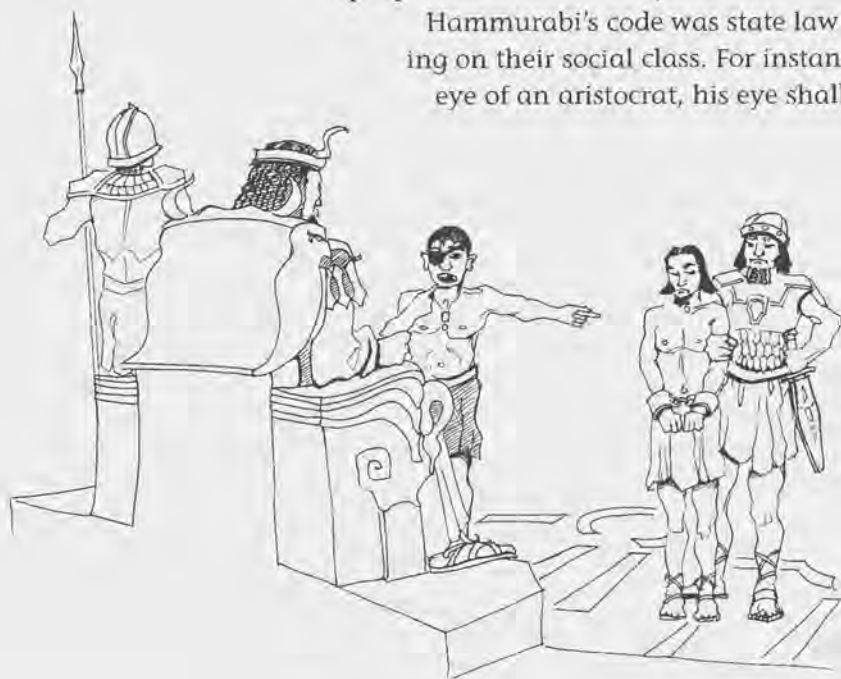
### Eye for eye

One of the most advanced legal codes of the ancient world was that of Hammurabi, king of Babylon in 1800 B.C. It was based on the principle of an "eye

for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” Although we might dismiss this also as primitive, we can find the same sort of principle expressed through such sayings as “evening the score”. This was a great step up on the ladder of justice from the law of the jungle. Instead of knocking out all of the person’s teeth, you knock out just one! If only some people in our own society were as advanced as this!

Hammurabi’s code was state law and it treated people differently depending on their social class. For instance, it stated “if a noble has destroyed the eye of an aristocrat, his eye shall be destroyed. If he has destroyed the eye of a commoner, he shall pay one mina of silver.”

A similar principle underlies the Old Testament’s code of justice where, instead of literally taking an eye for an eye, a system of fair compensation was worked out. If you injured someone you had to compensate them with some amount of money or other goods according to a generally agreed scale of compensation. The Judaic Law was God’s law and therefore applied equally to everyone. No one, not even the king, was above this law.



## The Golden Rule

The ethical systems that have developed in the world’s major religions, including Christianity and late Judaism, are all based on the idea of reciprocity. It is the moral point of view that one must take into consideration the effects of one’s actions on other people. In order to do this we have to be able to empathize with others and see things through their eyes, not just through our own. There are two main variations on this view, which is often referred to as the Golden Rule.

In the fifth century B.C., Confucius was asked, “Is there any one word that can serve as a principle for the conduct of life?” Confucius answered, “Perhaps the word is reciprocity: do not do to others what you would not want others to do to you.” Here we think, “Suppose the other person was me? How would I feel?” We act out of compassion. We do not hurt others because we feel their pain as our own. We see someone suffering and we are touched because we can imagine how the other person must feel. So, if you don’t like to be hit, do not hit others; if you do not like to be ‘put down’, do not ‘put down’ others.

For Jesus this kind of worldview was too passive. Instead he taught that we should “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” In this case, we actively help those who need help because we realize that if we were in that situation we ourselves would want to be helped. We listen to others because we want to be listened to. We respect others because we want to be respected. We treat others as if they were extensions of ourselves. We love our neighbor as ourselves.

## Loving your enemy

But Jesus went beyond even that. He said that we should love not merely our neighbors but even our enemies. Of course, few people in the past 2,000 years have been able to practice that quality and depth of love. It seems so unrealistic and

unnatural. Those few individuals that did practice it are remembered by history as saints. Some, such as Boris and Gleb, the two able sons of Prince Vladimir of ancient Russia, were slain because they refused to fight their brother. Others such as Abraham Lincoln made their enemies into friends. Although for many of us such a standard of love may seem too idealistic, we should know that some were able to reach that level of love.

## Boris and Gleb

Prince Vladimir of Kiev was responsible for the conversion of Rus to Christianity in 988. Vladimir had twelve sons. After his death the eldest, Sviatopolk, attempted to get rid of his brothers so that he could become the sole ruler of the country. He chose Boris as the first object of his attack. Boris was the head of a strong detachment of his father's troops. Though quite young, Boris was popular among his men and had already acquired a reputation as a skillful leader in defending the country against nomads. Yet, he did not resist Sviatopolk and was pitilessly murdered.

Before dying he asked God's forgiveness for his brother. Boris was in the prime of his youth and wanted to live, but as a Christian he felt that he was not justified in bringing about the death of others in defense of his own life. He was prepared to lead his men into battle when they were protecting their families and homes against barbaric invaders. This time the situation was different, for his enemy wanted only Boris' destruction. Boris decided to sacrifice his life in order to follow Christ's example by accepting an innocent suffering and death. His brother Gleb followed his example and perished a few days later in similar circumstances.



Sviatopolk later paid for his crime against his brothers. Yaroslav, another son of Vladimir, avenged their deaths by driving him out of Rus. Yaroslav was given the throne of Kiev and his reign brought great prosperity to the land. He is remembered in Russian history as Yaroslav the Wise.

## Choosing the future

So, where are you on this scale of righteousness? When something bad happens, how do you respond? Do you let your behavior and attitude be determined by others or by yourself? For example, when we say, “he makes me mad,” we are pretending that we are not responsible for our emotions and behavior. Too often we claim that how we are is a result of our environment or background. Therefore, we can never be different. We think we can never change. It is other people who make us happy, sad, or angry. It is other people’s fault if we are in a bad mood. If this were true then free will would be simply a fabrication of our imagination and we would not be free but merely a slave of our emotions, impulses and circumstances.

The alternative is to recognize that we are responsible for the way we are and the way we act. Being in control of one’s emotions means that we can decide how we are going to act in certain situations. We can decide how we are going to be affected by our environment. In the *Gulag Archipelago* Russian author Alexander Solzhenitsyn recognized that there were two kinds of people among the labor camps of Siberia: those who allowed themselves to be molded by the environment and became corrupted, and those who decided that how they felt and who they were was not going to be determined by the system. Even in such inhumane circumstances, they kept their integrity and inner freedom. So we, too, should mature in a way that we can have that kind of freedom. Freedom to choose and to act based on values and principles— not impulses.

It is good to reflect on what values or mottos that we hold dear. Then perhaps our relationships with others can develop in a positive way. We can escape from being the victim of our circumstances and instead be their master, creating a better environment around us and a better version of ourselves.



## Individual Exercise



Please answer the questions or complete the statements:

### *Me:*

- 'It's my life and I can do with it whatever I like'. Is this true?
- What do I want others to think about me?
- What three (non-material) things could I not live without?
- The single most important thing to me in my life is . . .
- I am the type of person who . . .

### *Others:*

- Are human beings more valuable than animals? Why? What is the value of a human being?
- Are there any beliefs that all people have in common?
- Are people responsible for their actions?
- Are human beings basically good or basically evil?
- What I value the most in others is . . .
- I feel really good when other people . . .

### *Society:*

- What do we gain or lose from being members of society?
- Who decides what a society is like?
- Does my behavior make a difference to my society? Why or why not?
- I want to live in a society that . . .
- I believe that the main responsibility to create a good society lies in the hands of . . .

### *Future:*

- What do I think the world is going to be like in ten years? Will things be the same, better or worse?
- Am I going to make a difference in changing the world?
- What do I dream of doing with my life in the future?
- What do I see myself doing five years from now? How about in ten years?
- If I could contribute one thing to the world, what would it be?
- My ideal world is . . .

## For Your Journal



- What is the guiding motto of your life?
- Into which category (law of the jungle, eye for an eye, Golden Rule, or loving your enemy) does your moral decision making fall?

## Eight Degrees of Charity

In the twelfth century Moses Maimonides, the great Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages, formulated eight 'degrees' of charity. Starting with the lowest, they are:

1. Giving grudgingly.
2. Giving willingly but less than you could.
3. Giving only when you have been asked.
4. Giving before you have been asked.
5. The receiving person knowing who has given but the giving person not knowing who has received.
6. The giving person knowing who they are giving to but the receiving not knowing who has given.
7. The giving person not knowing whom they are giving to and the receiving person not knowing who has given.
8. Giving in such a way as to make the receiving person independent and never in need of charity again.
  - Where do you stand on Maimonides' scale?
  - Describe what goes through your mind when you give to others.