

An Uncommon Goodness: On Non-Retaliatioin and Blessing Your Enemies.

Matthew 5:38-48

I know of no teaching of Jesus more debated, more perplexing, more dismissed or of more consequence than today's verses in the Sermon on the Mount. I'm calling it, "An uncommon goodness" and it's about non-retaliation and blessing your enemies.

Some whole denominations and ethical systems have been based on their interpretations of these verses.

Some Christians make an all too easy compromise with these words. They don't struggle enough with them. Some churches, like Mennonites and Quakers, have built their life around a rigorous following of them.

Endless questions have arisen through the centuries. Like, "Do they apply to the personal realm only and not the realm of politics and nations?" Or "Did Jesus mean it for the world to come, and when the kingdom has arrived, but not for today?" And on and on.

Jesus is being intentionally provocative here. The poet's phrases apply; they are "counter, original, spare, strange."

Well, what are we to make of these teachings today? It is more than an academic exercise; they can make a difference in our everyday lives. They can be a daily spiritual exercise. So let's plunge in.

I

Jesus:

You've heard it taught, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, 'Do not resist evil, (or evil doers). But if someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other also.

Jesus is startling our minds into action. We might start: at its core it means non-retaliation. Don't hit back.

But does it mean letting a bully or abuser continue to attack you? Some scholars note that to be struck on the right cheek is to be struck with the back of the hand. It is hurtful insult, but it is not an attempt to kill you or maim you. I do not think Jesus' words mean to let someone continue to attack or abuse you. Jesus also taught there are times to "shake the dust", and move away from the range of the attacks. Get out of that hell! This is the tragic necessity for women's shelters for women and children in homes of abuse.

I saw a letter. It was on the church's letterhead, from the leadership of a well-known church in California. It was sent to a woman who was part of the congregation. It read:

We care deeply about your family. We strongly believe you should remove the restraining order and end the separation from your husband...We therefore are requesting that you forgive your [husband], allow him to move back home, and once again follow his leadership as scripture teaches.

The letter was in response to the woman's letter asking to be removed from the church's membership.

But Jesus says, "resist not evil", or the evil doer. What can this mean? To be completely passive in the face of evil? The most creative and faithful way I've known in the living out of these words are the movements of non-violent resistance to structures of evil and injustice. So, the Civil Rights Movement led by Martin Luther King, and the non-violent resistance movement led by Gandhi in India. There is resistance, real resistance, but the methods are those of non-violence.

II

Then Jesus goes on with other examples of uncommon goodness. If someone sues you for your cloak, give them your undergarment too. And then

one which would have stuck in the craw of the crowds listening to Jesus: if an enemy Roman soldier forces you to carry his gear one mile, carry it two miles. Some scholars have tried to make Jesus a zealot, a member of the group mounting a violent insurgence against the Roman occupier. They cite a few verses. But it is manifestly false. It ignores the main teachings of Jesus and how he lived and how he died—by the Roman sword, not taking up the sword.

Then the last example: Give to those who beg from you and who need to borrow from you. When you go out, carry a little extra cash to give those who ask. Don't ask yourself if they are worthy, or what they will do with it. Just give. Call it you Sermon on the Mount fund.

III

So what can these verses mean to us in Statesville, 2023, sitting in the pews of a church of Jesus followers? What might a non-violent life look like for us?

Through the centuries there have been two major ways of trying to be faithful to Jesus' teaching here.

The first we call the *rigorist approach*, a radical adoption of Jesus' non-violence and pacifism. One example is the witness of "peace churches" in the Christian fellowship: the early Anabaptists, Quakers, Mennonites, the Amish.

The other approach could be called the “*pragmatic approach*.” Reinhold Niebuhr called it “Christian Realism.” Its goal is to do all that is possible to reduce violence in the world. Sometimes, it says, this requires some kind of force to curb violence.

In the first three centuries when Christians were a sometimes-persecuted minority, most Christians were pacifists. They would follow Jesus’ teachings here and “Thou shalt not kill” in the Ten Commandments, and refuse to enter the military or take up arms.

Then came Constantine who elevated Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman empire. Now Christian theologians like Augustine had many other things to think about, and they began to counsel emperors and the powers that be about what constituted “just wars.” There were two parts of “just war theory”: “*just cause*” of war, such as a war of self-defense; and “*just conduct*” in war, such as the minimization of civilian deaths.

There would be who disagree with me, but I think that both the rigorist and the pragmatist approach can be faithful attempts to follow Jesus. Both ways require deep thoughtfulness.

What Jesus is calling us to be is *creative* in applying and interpreting these verses for our time and our lives. Use your faith, your brain, your heart and see

how you can best respond to evil doers, or, how you can insert love and goodness into a situation of conflict. One of my professors, Glen Stassen, son of Harold Stassen who ran for President seven times, called this taking “peace-making initiatives.” How can we take the first step in making peace and reconciliation happen? What surprising ways can we apply these teachings? Like doing something nice—anononymously—for someone you are having trouble with. “Hmm. Who did that card come from?”

To go back to the Roman soldier. What would he have thought about someone carrying his gear an extra mile? Peace-making initiatives.

IV

And now to the second big part of Jesus’ teaching here: On loving and blessing your enemy. Clarence Jordan has a most helpful way of tracking the moral progression Jesus is urging through today’s verses. Jesus is trying to pull us and all the world in this direction—from unlimited retaliation all the way to unlimited love. Here are the four stages:

Stage one: *Unlimited retaliation*: If someone takes you eye out, you can take two eyes, or an arm or even kill them.

Stage two: *Limited retaliation*: An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth—and no more! One step up. Jesus said: *No retaliation!*

Stage three: *Limited love*: love your neighbor, hate your enemy. A step up, but here comes the moral quagmire. Who is my neighbor? *Whom am I commanded to love and whom do I not have to love?* It's the question the lawyer of the Hebrew Law asked Jesus one day. And Jesus told him a story of the Good Samaritan that coaxed the lawyer and coaxes us into the challenging proposition: *everyone* is your neighbor.

Which leads us to Stage Four: *Unlimited love*. Here it comes:

You've heard it said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy" But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Love your enemy. We may begin by loving them with our minds: seeking to understand them. It may move to wanting the best for them, and active good will. And what is the *character* of our prayer for our enemies? Not a "Lord, knock some sense into them" kind of prayer, but prayers to bless them! Paul relayed the word from Jesus: "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them!"

Bless them?

I've led prayers in church for our enemies all through my years as a minister, but I don't think I have ever asked God to *bless* them! Maybe such a spiritual exercise would help the condition of my soul, our souls. When we're tempted to curse them, *bless* them.

But *how*? How can we bless them? Sometimes the Church teaches *Don't!* but not *How*, *Don't!* And here comes Buddha to the rescue. Buddhism is full of important truths about the meaning of living an enlightened life, but it also has a plentitude of spiritual *practices* to help us on our way toward such enlightenment. So where do we begin in our spiritual practice of loving and blessing our enemies?

Perhaps it starts with what Buddhists call "*maitre*", offering yourself "*self-compassion*", practicing loving-kindness to yourself. Then as we do, the loving-kindness can begin to spread to others.

Burmese Buddhists call this practice "*metta*." We send out *good will*, first to ourselves, then to others, beginning with those we love, then to our acquaintances, then to "neutral" people, then to those who, to use the Southern expression, "get on our final nerve", then last, to all beings.

Pema Chodron, American Buddhist nun says for those we don't like, we pray: "May this person who is driving me crazy enjoy happiness and be free of suffering."

So in this daily practice we repeat four blessings, four prayers, again, first to ourselves, then to loved ones, then to acquaintances, then to neutral people, then to the enemy-types, and then to all beings.

The four prayers, first for yourself

May I be free from danger

May I be free from mental suffering

May I be free from physical suffering

May I have the ease of well-being

Now, these blessings are extended to others, individuals and groups of people

May they be free from danger

May they be free from mental suffering

May they be free from physical suffering

May they have the ease of well-being

I think Jesus had something like this in mind when he gave us these instructions. I've tried it, this *metta* practice and it has begun to lighten my enemies list.

VI

And lastly, *why* do we do this? And Jesus says, "Because this is what God is like, and because this is the way you become daughters and sons of God. We imitate God, who sends the sun and rain alike to bless the good *and* the crooked.

Jesus ends this part of the Sermon on the Mount with the words, "Be perfect as your *Abba* in heaven is perfect." Perfect?! He's not talking about moral

perfectionism, never making mistakes, but about deepening the perfection of love, which makes us whole, complete—which is what the Greek word for perfect means.

The poet W.H. Auden wrote these lines:

O stand, stand at the window

As the tears scald and start;

You shall love your crooked neighbour

With your crooked heart. (“As I Walked Out One Evening”)

It all begins with God blessing our crooked little hearts.

Amen