

Sunday – July 31, 2011
Pastor - Rev. Walter W. Westbrook
Sermon – **Sermon on the Mount IV**
Resisting Evil

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Scripture: Matthew 5:38-48

Today we continue with the Six Antitheses. We've already seen how Jesus offers deeper alternatives to the Jewish Law regarding anger, adultery, divorce and oaths. Now we get to the hard part.

Matthew 5:38-42 - Do not resist an evildoer.

The thing they had heard is known in Latin as Lex Talionis. We find it in Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, and Deuteronomy 19:21. The Exodus passage is representative: "If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe."

The very first thing we must get absolutely clear is that this law is not a license to enact revenge. It is meant to **restrict** revenge. Before the law, if someone blinded a member of your family, you would most likely go kill him. If someone killed a member of your family, you would go kill the entire family of the killer. You can see how things would escalate, as each act of vengeance (which would inevitably be called "justice") would be greater than the crime it is punishing.

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, while a far superior law to slaking the unrestrained thirst for revenge, is the quickest way to a blind and toothless world. And this is not at all acceptable to Jesus.

This is the point where many Christians simply step off. They don't want to call the Savior unreasonable or naïve or just crazy. So, they simply pretend this has nothing to do with their lives. To accept abuse without retaliation is not a good idea. If people think they can get away with doing anything to you, they'll do it. So, not resisting evil, which is exactly what Jesus tells us to do, is just a bad idea, one that would lead to the overthrow of civilization by the barbarian hordes.

If we are brave enough to stare directly at this new law, we may try doing mental gymnastics to avoid the message that Jesus is clearly delivering. “He can’t possibly mean **that**. What about revenge, I mean, justice? He cannot possibly be telling me to just accept the abuse, can he? What’s the point in that?”

I’ve said before that Jesus will exaggerate when he wants to make a point. He exaggerates some here. For instance, if you gave up your cloak as well as your coat, you’d be standing in court buck naked. But, the repetition of the message indicates how important the idea is: slapping, lawsuits, soldiers demanding you carry their packs, beggars, borrowers. Isn’t this a prescription for life as a doormat?

Let’s consider this: Resisting evil is not the problem. The problem is resisting evil with evil means. Someone slaps you, so you slap them. You have perpetuated evil. We must resist evil without becoming evil.

Anyone who’s been part of the groups reading the book about unconditional forgiveness knows where this has to lead. Retaliation simply feeds the evil, gives it a new place to live. The only way to break the cycle of evil, of violence, of retribution, is forgiveness. If someone does something awful to us, we can absorb the blow, pay the price, not demand that that person suffer because of what they’ve done to us.

Look at the last two examples: if you give money to a beggar or if you lend money to someone you know will never pay you back, you have absorbed that loss, you have paid their debt.

Forgiveness is resisting evil. It is refusing to become evil. It stops the cycle of evil. Revenge simply keeps the wheels of evil turning, and we don’t want to do that.

Matthew 5:43-48 - Love extends to the enemy

Nowhere in the Old Testament does it tell us to hate our enemy. But, there are passages that might lead one to that conclusion - passages that say that God hates all evil-doers, and imply we should do the same.

But, Jesus says we are to **love** our enemies. He had included as our enemies the people who hit us, who take us to court, and the Roman soldier who has

the right to demand that you carry his pack a mile. The Romans were the **hated** occupying force, representing the greatest empire the world had ever seen - quite a contrast to Israel, an insignificant backwater as far as the Romans were concerned.

So, Jesus is not only demanding that we love our personal enemies who seek to do us harm, he also demands that we love our nation's enemies. He is demanding of his listeners that they love the Roman military who march around showing off their superior weaponry, and forcing them to do whatever menial tasks they want done. It was the Romans, after all, who had the right to crucify anyone considered an enemy of the state. And, it was not unusual for them to line the roads with literally hundreds of men hanging on crosses, slowly dying the most gruesome and humiliatingly public death imaginable. Among Jesus' listeners on the mount, everyone would have seen many crucifixions, and most of them probably knew personally men who had been crucified by the hated Romans.

Nobody loved the Romans. Nobody was looking to reconcile with them. Nobody wanted to embrace them as friends. Everyone wanted them gone, preferably dead and gone. But, Jesus demanded that they love the Romans **right now**.

Jesus introduced to the world the idea of loving one's enemies. Nobody had ever written about that before, not in Jewish literature, not in pagan literature. Let's not pretend that we have not heard this message, or that he wouldn't say the same thing in today's world, or that it really doesn't matter because it's just stupid. Let's admit that such a policy is hard, but there it is. We should not claim the name of Christ if we are not willing to follow his orders.

Every now and then, some TV or radio preacher will offer a sermon about how Christianity is perfectly reasonable, a paragon of common sense. A close look at the Six Antitheses would indicate that such a claim is simply delusional, not based at all on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

The teachings of Jesus Christ, as found in a very concentrated form in the Sermon on the Mount, are not reasonable or common sense. Jesus refutes reason and common sense, just as he refutes the status quo, whatever that status quo may be. Why does he do that? Why would he tell us to do things that common sense would insist we never do?

The teachings of Christ are not designed to help us fit into society, to make us popular or respectable or rich. The teachings of Christ raise our sights above the common sense of a reasonable world. He is teaching us how to be citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, which he brought with him, and which he has placed in each of our hearts, as well as in the relationships between Christians, including in his churches.

The Christian goal in this life is **not necessarily** to fit in. It is to follow our risen Savior whose life and teachings point us towards lives of love and forgiveness, including forgiving our worst enemies, personal and beyond.

His final thought in this section on loving and forgiving our enemies is that we should be perfect, just as God is perfect. What the heck does that mean? How are we supposed to be like God?

We don't arrive at perfection by withdrawing from the world, trying to stay untouched by the filthy masses. We don't arrive at perfection by perfectly following all the laws of our community. We arrive at perfection by serving God with our whole hearts, by being single-minded in our devotion to living out God's will.

Think back to the Beatitudes. We seek perfection through achieving a purity of heart (our devotion to God), by hungering and thirsting for righteousness (the real "justice"), by making peace with our enemies by forgiving them and loving them. John Wesley often said that Christians were "going on to perfection." We cannot hope to become absolutely perfect Christians in this life. But, we can live as though we believe it matters. And with Christ's help, we can be people in whom and through whom others can get a glimpse of the perfection of the Kingdom of Heaven, and begin to understand how much God loves them, and their worst enemies. What more can we hope to do?