

"PRAY FOR THOSE WHO PERSECUTE YOU"

Matthew 5:38-48

It's Monday morning. Your children and husband finish breakfast and head off to school and to work. You begin your morning chores when the phone rings. It's an old friend who wonders if she can stop over for coffee. You tell her to come over.

Within a few minutes the doorbell rings and you invite your friend in and sit down together at the kitchen table. The ritual begins. First you talk about the weather. Then the conversation moves on to the kids. Suddenly your friend's face turns serious, and with an awkward voice she brings up the subject of religion and your church. You know your friend is a fundamentalist who is very vocal about her religious beliefs which are very different from your own.

You can see her body tense up as she crosses her arms in front of her. You feel your body doing the same thing. What had started as a loose and friendly conversation is suddenly becoming very uncomfortable. It's as though a wall has instantly been erected between the two of you and you can no longer look into one another's eyes.

She proceeds to tell you why and how you are wrong, why and how your church is wrong, quoting one Bible verse after another. It sounds like a prepared speech and you know this isn't the first time she has preached it. Your face begins to turn red with anger as she tells you your infant baptism isn't good enough. She tells you your church is a cold place where no one really loves one another. She tells you you need to have a dramatic conversion experience, a dramatic new birth, as necessary proof that you are truly a Christian.

You don't know how to respond out of your anger. If you try to dialogue with her, it will just mean a long and drawn out argument. You don't have the time or the desire for arguing. So you make an attempt to change the subject to something less controversial. It doesn't work. With your anger at a new level you begin to fight fire with fire, criticism with criticism, eye for eye, and tooth for tooth. To fight back when we are persecuted is the natural human reaction.

Growing up I was taught over and over again to be competitive. To fight back. To stay on top and never let myself end up on the bottom. The way I was taught and the way you were taught is the Old Testament way.

Leviticus 24:20 says, "fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. Deuteronomy 10:20-21 is even more explicit. "And the rest shall hear, and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you. Your eye shall not pity; it shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot." Then again in Exodus 21:23-25. "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." So there it is right out of the Old Testament. We should fight back and it's O.K. by God for me to get even.

But then Jesus comes along and in this morning's Sermon on the Mount he says: You have heard that it was said an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if anyone would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you.

With these teachings, with these examples, Jesus seems to be telling his listeners the exact opposite of the Old Testament law. But we must remember that Old Testament law such as the Ten Commandments served to limit or restrain the people of God in their behavior. When in Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Exodus it says, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," that was a law to restrain people in their natural tendency toward vengeance.

Simply put, if someone knocks my tooth out it is better to limit me to knocking out one of his teeth than allowing me to knock out all of his teeth in return. Or if someone from your tribe murders a person from my tribe, it is better to limit us to murdering one of your tribe in return rather than allowing our feelings of vengeance to run wild and murdering more than one person in return. Old Testament law served to restrain the people of God and to provide a fair system of justice.

Those people who did not obey the law separated themselves from God. The law stood in between God and humans. The people's relationship to God was determined by their obedience of the law. The law was the mediator.

Now Jesus comes along in this morning's Gospel and changes everything. You have heard it was said, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Forget it. I say to you, "if anyone strikes you on the right cheek turn to him the other also."

Before Jesus we had only two choices. When someone hit us we could either run away or fight back. Flight or fight. Jesus gives us a third alternative, a third choice. Neither run away or fight back, but turn the other cheek.

In Jesus' society most were right handed. It was normal practice for masters to backhand their slaves on the right cheek. Husbands regularly backhanded their wives, parents backhanded

children, and Romans backhanded Jews. The listeners Jesus is preaching to are those people being backhanded, the slaves, the wives, the children, the Jews, the victims. What Jesus is describing is very real for them in their everyday lives.

Why does Jesus counsel these already humiliated people to turn the other cheek? Because it robs the oppressor of the power to humiliate. The person who turns the other cheek is saying, in effect, "Try again. Your first blow failed to 'achieve its intended effect. I deny you the power to humiliate me. I am a human being just like you. Your money, gender, race, age, or status does not alter that fact. You cannot demean me."

Such a response creates enormous difficulties for the striker. How do you now hit the victims other cheek? You have been forced, against your will, to regard that person as an equal human being. You have been stripped of your power to dehumanize the other.

Jesus then goes on to use a second example that also would have been very real for his listeners. He says, "If anyone would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well."

The creditor has hauled the debtor into court to try to get repayment on a loan. The debtor is very poor and only has his coat to give as collateral for the loan.

We must understand that indebtedness was the most serious social problem in first-century Palestine. Jesus' parables are full of debtors struggling to salvage their lives.

It is in this context that Jesus speaks. His hearers are the poor. They hate the system that subjects them to humiliation by stripping them of their land, their goods, and finally even their coat. So why does Jesus counsel the poor to give over their underwear as well? This would mean stripping off all their clothing and marching out of court stark naked.

Put yourself in the debtor's place as some of you already have, and imagine how they must have laughed when Jesus told them this. Jesus did have a sense of humor.

There stands the creditor, beet-red with embarrassment, your outer garment in the one hand, your undergarment in the other. You have suddenly turned the tables. You had no hope of winning the trial; the law was entirely in the creditor's favor. But you have refused to be humiliated, and at the same time you have registered a stunning protest against a system that spawns such debt. You have said in effect, "You want my robe? Here take everything! Now you have got all I have except my body. Is that what you'll take next?"

Nakedness was taboo in Israel, and shame fell not on the naked person but on the person viewing or causing the nakedness. The creditor is revealed not to be a respectable moneylender but a contributor to the reduction of an entire people to landlessness and now, nakedness. Through your nakedness, the creditor sees the result of his practices, and for perhaps the first time in his life, has a chance to repent.

Jesus goes on to give a third example of how to neither run away or fight back. He says, "if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles." Again this example is very real for Jesus' listeners.

In Galilee, Herod, the Roman governor, maintained an army patterned after Rome's, that had the right to impose labor. Mile markers were placed regularly along the highways. A soldier could force a citizen to carry his pack one mile only; to force the civilian to go farther carried with it severe penalties under military law. This way Rome attempted to limit the anger of the occupied people and still keep its armies on the move. Yet this practice was a bitter reminder that the Jews were an occupied people even in the Promised Land.

To this situation Jesus does not advise revolt. He knows the futility of armed revolt against Roman military power. But why walk the second mile? As in turning the other cheek and in giving up your underwear, Jesus advises how the oppressed can gain the initiative, how the oppressed can gain dignity in an impossible situation.

Imagine the soldier's surprise when at the next mile marker he reaches for his 80 pound pack and you say, "Oh no, let me carry it another mile." What are you up to? Normally the soldier has to force people to carry his pack, and now you do it cheerfully and will not stop. Are you insulting his strength? Being kind? The soldier does not know how to react.

The oppressed civilian has seized the initiative. The soldier has never dealt with this problem before. The soldier is made to feel very uncomfortable and may begin to see the oppression taking place.

Jesus uses these three examples to emphasize that the Old Testament law of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth will no longer work. We need to learn a new alternative to either running away or fighting back.

It's too bad that Jesus did not provide 15 or 20 further examples of his teaching on the third alternative, active nonviolence, since we do not naturally tend toward this new response. We need models, and we need to rehearse Jesus' third way in our daily lives if we ever hope to resort to it in a crisis.

I began the sermon with an example of being confronted by a fundamentalist friend. We could change the subject (run away) or we could fight back. Or we could go with that person the second mile by seizing the initiative from her. She has taken the initiative by bringing up the subject of religion. She has persecuted your church. You do not run away or persecute her

church in return. Rather you agree that her church has certain strengths that ours lacks. You agree there is much you can learn from her. You share your understanding of the Christian church and the Christian faith. You keep a smile on your face and remain friendly. Suddenly, you have taken the initiative and the tables are turned.

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth are out. Forget it. Going the second mile, loving your enemies, and praying for those who persecute you are in. Remember them. The Old Testament law no longer serves as the mediator between God and humanity. Now our relationship to God is determined by our relationship to the word and deed of Jesus Christ. Confession or denial of Jesus determines our eternal destiny.

Let us take Jesus and his teachings in the Sermon on the Mount very seriously in our everyday lives. Let us really try not to run away and not to fight back. When we are feeling persecuted let us take the initiative by turning the other cheek, by giving up our underwear, by going the second mile. And let us always pray for those who persecute us.

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