

No Longer An Echo

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Preacher: Darrell Johnson

[0 : 00] I wish there were a way for the whole world to hear Jesus preach this section of his Sermon on the Mount.

I wish there were a way for the whole world to hear him preach the whole Sermon on the Mount. But especially this section and the text to follow which flows from it.

The world would change overnight. It is a fact of history. Wherever and whenever Jesus is given a hearing in this section of his Sermon, the kingdom of heaven invades earth in powerfully redemptive ways.

You have heard it was said, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. But I say to you, in order for Jesus to get a hearing on this section of his Sermon, we who listen to him have to resolve a crisis that has been building since we began to hear him preach.

We have to decide whether or not we can trust the preacher on the Mount. We have to decide, does he know what he is talking about?

[1 : 21] Does he know where we live? Does he know the way things are in this world? That is, we have to decide whether or not the preacher on the Mount is smart.

Do you think he is smart? I think most people who hear Jesus preach his sermon think he is good. I think most people who hear him preach his sermon think he is compassionate.

I think most people who hear him preach his sermon think he is insightful. Smart? Is he smart? Is he street smart?

Does he know what it takes to make it in the world? You have heard it was said, eye for eye, tooth for tooth.

But I say to you, Jesus is here working with one of the oldest laws of civilization, the so-called lex talionis, or the law of just retribution.

[2 : 31] It is found in the earliest known code of laws, in the code of Hammurabi, dated about 2,000 years before the birth of Christ. And it is found in the Old Testament, in sections in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, in the so-called case laws or ordinance sections.

So, for example, in Exodus 21, verses 22 to 25, we read this. If men who are fighting hit a woman who is pregnant, and she gives birth prematurely, but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court of laws.

But if there is serious injury, 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.

Now, three facts to keep in mind when reflecting on this Old Testament use of the lex talionis. One, the stipulation was entrusted to the judges of Israel.

That is, lex talionis had to be administered by the courts and not by individuals. Prior to the giving of this stipulation, injury to one member of the family could be avenged by any other member of the offended family.

[3 : 57] Members of the offended family could injure or kill any member of the offending family. The lex talionis takes revenge out of private hands and puts them into the public court of law.

If revenge is to be taken, it could only be taken by the court. You can see then that this stipulation checks the tendency to take the law into one's own hands.

It checks the tendency to act against injustice unilaterally. Two, this stipulation was given to limit revenge.

And as such, says Old Testament scholar Brevard Childs, it marked an important advance for humanity. Lex talionis limits the victim's compensation to an exact equivalent.

No more. Punishment must fit the crime. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth. No more. Three, this stipulation is properly called a permission.

[5 : 05] It is an accommodation to our fallen nature. It's an accommodation to our fallen nature. It is as though God were saying to us, if you must have compensation, at least make it fair.

Eye for eye, tooth for tooth. If you cannot refrain from revenge, at least make it civil. Foot for foot and not life for foot.

But, and this is the crucial thing to realize, from the beginning, it has been God's will that no human seek revenge. That no human seek to retaliate.

How do we know that? We know that from the so-called holiness code in Leviticus 19. Leviticus 19, verse 2. Be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy.

And then in the rest of the passage, line after line, God spells out what it means to be holy like God until we come to the climax of the text, verse 18.

[6 : 10] Leviticus 19, 18. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord. Lex Talionis was given as a permission to those who could not find it in their heart to resist revenge.

At least be fair. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth. I think you can now understand what Jesus is doing with the Lex Talionis in his Sermon on the Mount.

He is bringing us back to God's deeper, prior, more perfect will. Civilized humanity will limit revenge. But when the kingdom of heaven comes on earth, kingdomized humanity, humanity under the rule of God and Jesus Christ will reject revenge altogether.

You have heard it was said, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. But I say to you, do not resist an evil person.

[7 : 21] What does that mean? Do not resist an evil person. Just stand there and take it and let evil run rampant.

Notice that Jesus does not say, he does not say, if someone slaps your brother on the right cheek or someone forces your sister to go two miles or someone takes advantage of your child, Jesus is not calling us to passively stand by while others are treated unjustly or in an evil way.

For Jesus also taught us that we are to confront those who are doing sin to other people. Matthew 18, verse 15, if your brother sins, go and reprove him.

Just do it in private. Do not resist does not mean just stand there while others treat you wrongly.

Jesus' command, love your neighbor as yourself, says one New Testament scholar, provides one to stand by immobile, intolerant, while the life, dignity, and security of one's neighbor is transgressed. Martin Luther made the point well, as he often did. Jesus, Luther says, Jesus is not saying no one should ever resist evil, for that would completely undermine all rule and authority.

[8 : 44] But this is what he is saying, you, you, shall not resist evil. Then I ask, is Jesus saying that when we are injured by an evil person, we are just to stand there and take it?

Is that what he means by do not resist evil? Just take it? Was Dietrich Bonhoeffer correct when during the reign of Adolf Hitler, he wrote in his Cost of Discipleship, the only way to overcome evil is to let it run itself to a standstill because it does not find the resistance it is looking for?

Was Bonhoeffer right when he went on to say, when evil meets no opposition and encounters no obstacles but only patient endurance, its sting is drawn and at last it meets an opponent which is more than its match?

Is Jesus here calling us to passive non-resistance? Was Bonhoeffer right when he concludes his comments on Jesus' words by saying, evil becomes a spent force when we put up no resistance?

Is that what Jesus means? Now, before going any further, I think it's very important to realize that Jesus has a realistic appraisal of the way things are in the world.

[10 : 10] Jesus labels the person who wants to hurt us as evil. Verse 39, do not resist the one who is evil. This tells me that Jesus is not wearing rose-colored glasses.

Jesus is not this Pollyanna. He is not spiritually naive. Jesus judges the nature and the purpose of the person who wants to hurt us as evil.

Jesus is not out of touch with the way things are in the world when he calls us to this different way of life. Indeed, and this is crucial to grasp, it is because Jesus knows how evil evil is that he says what he says.

It's because he realizes where we live and it's because he knows what evil can do that he tells us what he tells us. You have heard it was said, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, but I say to you, do not resist the evil person.

What does that mean? And what are we to do with all of the emotional energy that comes when we encounter someone who wants to hurt us? Jesus answers with four illustrations.

[11 : 23] Four illustrations from everyday life. In these four examples, I think he's interpreting what he means by do not resist. And I submit to you, it's nothing short of being brilliant.

Let me first make sure that we understand what Jesus is saying in each of these illustrations, and then let's go back and listen to what he tells us to do in each of these cases.

Illustration one, verse 39. If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. Now, as you likely know, Jesus is not here speaking about any old slap.

Only a left-handed person can slap the right side of the person's face standing in front of them.

Jesus is therefore speaking about the slap with the back of the hand, a gesture of contempt.

Jesus is speaking about a deliberate insult forcing pain and humiliation. Illustration two, verse 40. If someone wants to sue you for your tunic, your shirt, let them have your cloak as well.

[12 : 35] Now, Jesus here is not speaking about any old attempt to take one's possessions. He's talking about a miscarriage of justice. Two major garments were worn by the people of the first century.

There was this tunic, this long undershirt worn close to the body, and then a cloak, a loose-fitting coat that went over the shirt. This coat was also used as a blanket at night.

And for many people, these are the only two articles of clothing that they have. So to sue for a man's tunic for his shirt was a terrible miscarriage of justice, which, according to the Old Testament, puts the sewer up against Yahweh, the champion of the powerless.

Illustration three, verse 41. If someone forces you to go with him one mile, go with him two. Now, Jesus here is not speaking about any old forced walk.

The word translated, forces, is a military term. And it refers to the Roman soldier's right to commandeer any Jewish person and force him to carry the pack one mile.

[13 : 47] You see this at work as Jesus is going to the cross. The Romans commandeer Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus' cross. It was a degrading act of colonial exploitation.

Now, illustration four, verse 41. Give to the one who asks you and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. Now, after these illustrations about being slapped and unjustly sued and commandeered by soldiers, this one seems a little bit anticlimactic.

But is it? Dale Bruner notes, by using this illustration last, Matthew's Jesus teaches us again that the usual test of discipleship occur in daily, unheroic situations.

Now, since Jesus is addressing the evil person, he's not in this fourth illustration speaking of any old request. He's dealing with the request that wants to take advantage of us.

Okay. What then does the bringer of the kingdom of God, the one who has all authority in heaven on earth, what does he call us to do in each of these four real life situations?

[15 : 03] If they should happen to us, how are kingdomized people, people of the kingdom of God, supposed to act? Clearly, we are not to try to get even.

But is that the end of it? Are we to passively stand there and let the evil person have their way? No. And here we come to the heart of the matter. Are we to passively stand by? No. For one big reason, there is nothing passive in any of Jesus' illustrations.

This is crucial. There's nothing passive in anything Jesus says in this text. I want you to get this so much, I'm going to ask you to repeat that word. Nothing passive. There's nothing passive.

Again, please. There's nothing passive. In each case, he is saying, do not try to get even. That's a waste of your time. But he is also saying, instead, go on the offensive and act in a way that changes the dynamics of the encounter.

[16 : 21] What? Go back through each of these four illustrations and listen to Jesus very carefully. We have to listen very carefully. And we're going to go in reverse order.

We'll start with the fourth illustration. Fourth illustration, verse 41. Does Jesus say what a modern paraphrase has him say?

Does Jesus say when someone asks you for something, give it to him? When someone wants to borrow something, lend it to him?

No. Because there's no it in the text. As St. Augustine pointed out, Jesus does not say give whatever you are asked, but give to whomever asks.

That's a very different thing. To give whatever somebody asks is merely passive, and it may be wrong. Do you give your children whatever they ask? Do you give a beggar whatever he asks,

knowing they're going to spend it on drugs?

[17 : 25] The focus is not on what is asked, but on who is asking. Jesus says, give to the one who asks. Loan to the one who wants to borrow.

The issue is the identity of the person and not the thing that's being asked for. Go beyond the person's surface request. Discern the real need. Engage the person.

Do not just passively stand there. Positively engage the person. Do you see that? Do you see that's not passive?

That's very active? A couple of heads shake, please. If you do. If you don't, I'm going to repeat it.

No. Nothing passive in that. Active engagement.

Illustration three, verse 41. Does Jesus say, if someone forces you to go one mile, let him force you to go two miles? No.

[18 : 23] He does not say, let him make you go further. That would be being passive. Instead, he says, go. You go two more miles. You go another mile.

Go. That's another matter altogether. Before the soldier can exploit you, you turn the tables. And you offer to take the oppressor's baggage another mile.

You see, when he forces you to carry his bag, you're his slave. Ah! But if you volunteer to carry his bag another mile, you're not his slave. You're now in charge of your life.

After the first mile, the soldier takes his pack off your back, starts to put it on his back to go the next mile. You take the pack back from him and put it on your back and the soldier says to you, hey, I didn't command you to go another mile.

To which you respond, I'm not under your orders. The whole situation changes. do you see that?

[19 : 31] Not passive. It's active. Illustration 2, verse 40. Does Jesus say, if someone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him sue you for your coat also?

No, he does not say, let him sue you. There's nothing passive here. Jesus says, let him have your coat also. That's another matter. Before he can sue you for more, give him more.

That's a whole different matter. Beat him to the punch. Crazy? No. It means you have wrested the offensive from the evil person.

It means you've stolen his thunder. It means you are now playing a different game that he's not used to. There are different weapons that he's never encountered before for which he or she is not prepared.

Illustration 1, verse 39. does Jesus say, as a modern paraphrase has him say, if someone slaps you on the right cheek, let him slap you on the other also?

[20 : 36] No. Jesus does not say, let him slap you. That's being passive. Jesus says, turn to him the other cheek.

That's another matter altogether. Listen even more carefully. Jesus does not simply even say, turn the other cheek. That would be passive acquiescence.

He says, turn to him the other cheek. It's active engagement. It means you've wrested the offensive from the evil person. It means you are now in charge of the situation.

Yes, it means you could get hurt more. But the evil person no longer is in charge. You are in charge. Jesus does not call us to passively surrender to evil.

He calls us to actively take the initiative to overcome the evil with good. Myron Augsburger puts it this way.

[21 : 40] Jesus is calling us to the freedom of not having our behavior determined by the way we are treated. That's an empty hole.

That's a sewer pit. We are given the freedom not to have our behavior determined by other people mistreating us.

E. Stanley Jones, 20th century Christian leader, whom the Indian Christians called the greatest missionary since St.

Paul, understood Jesus' words in this section of the Sermon on the Mount better than anybody. I've read just about everything on the Sermon on the Mount you can get your hands on. And nobody understands this section as well as E.

Stanley Jones. In his book, *The Christ of the Mount*, he asks, what should be done in each of these cases Jesus cites where wrong has been done? Jones answers, the temptation is to use the weapons of the wrong doer and to fight on his level and to give blow for blow.

[22 : 53] Right? Isn't that the temptation? To use the weapons of the wrong doer, fight on his level and give blow for blow. Don't do it, says Jesus, for if you do, blow begets blow, hate begets hate, and you will find yourself in a vicious cycle.

Get out of the cycle by rising to a higher level and by using higher weapons. Now when you read the rest of the gospel story, we realize that Jesus is only calling us to do what he did in the face of evil.

The preacher on the mount only calls us to do what he himself does. The local police spit on him, they blindfold him, and they hit him in the face.

And then the foreign military personnel pick up this insult and injury. They put a crown of thorns in his skull and they put a purple robe on him and they keep hitting him and mocking him and spitting on him again and again and again but he refuses to retaliate.

He refuses to play the game. He refuses to respond in kind. He takes the offensive, the offensive of goodwill doing.

[24 : 06] Now Roman soldiers knew power when they saw it. And one of the soldiers standing at the foot of the cross watching Jesus meet evil with good and the Roman soldier looks up at Jesus and says certainly this is the son of God.

This is power. I want to quote again from E. Stanley Jones this time from his book on Mahatma Gandhi. It's entitled Gandhi A Portrait of a Friend.

E. Stanley Jones had a close relationship with Gandhi. They often met. They talked about Jesus. They studied the Sermon on the Mount together. And Mahatma Gandhi was so taken by Jesus and Jesus way that he decided to give it a try.

Jones then writes this. We had demonstration before us in this age, the mid-20th century, as clearly as if in a laboratory, scientific demonstration that there are three levels of life.

And that these three levels of life give certain results. The lowest level is where we return evil for good. That's the demonic level. The next level is where we return good for good, evil for evil.

[25 : 24] This is the legalistic level. The highest level is where we return good for evil. This is the Christian level. What are the results of living on those levels? Return evil for good and you become evil and then nothing in the universe backs you.

The sum total of realities against you. You slowly, quickly, or slowly perish, but perish you will.

Return good for good, evil for evil, and you become an eye-for-eye, tooth-for-tooth person.

The other man's conduct determines yours. You get your code of conduct from the action of the other person. You have no moral standards of your own. You are an echo.

When applied to nations, this system leads straight to war. For you allow the conduct of another nation to determine yours. The lower acting nation inevitably pulls down the higher acting nation to its level.

There is war. Return good for evil, and it leads to your ennobling and to the possible redemption of the wrongdoer. in case the wrongdoer is not redeemed, nevertheless you are stronger.

[26 : 36] What a stirring paragraph. Did you hear the phrase, you are an echo? Return good for good, evil for evil, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, insult for insult, snub for snub, put down for put down, blow for blow, missile for missile, and you are merely an echo.

When the preacher on the mount grabs hold of us, we are no longer an echo of other people's behavior.

The kingdom comes, the spirit of Jesus comes and lifts us up to a higher level. Jones then gives us his assessment of these three levels of life.

The first level, evil for good is pure weakness. The second level, evil for evil, good for good is pseudo power and pure weakness. The third level, good for evil is pure power.

Any individual group or nation that adopts it is invincible. I wish there were a way that the world could hear Jesus preach his sermon.

[28 : 04] It would change overnight. I want to conclude with a reading from philosopher Dallas Willard.

To become a disciple of Jesus is to accept now the inversion of human distinctions that will sooner or later be forced upon everyone by the irresistible reality of the kingdom.

How must we think of Jesus in order to see this inversion happen in the present? We must simply, I love this, we must simply accept that he, Jesus, is the best and smartest man who ever lived in the world.

And who is even now the ruler of the kings of the earth. Then we heartily join his cosmic conspiracy to overcome evil with good.

Come now. Let us gather at the table which the preacher on the mount sets for us. come to the place where he who practices what he preaches gives us the grace to echo his way in the world.

[29 : 37] Boy, he's smart. de together.