

No Longer An Echo

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[0 : 0 0] Are you up for a sermon? Front row says go for it. In light of the horrible thing that we have experienced this past week, and in light of the President's call to make this a day of national mourning, I think it right that I change the text for today's sermon.

I had planned to invite you to take another look at this thing we call corporate worship and to do so through Psalm 95. I preached Psalm 95 in the first weeks of my ministry with you about 20 months ago now, and since that time the Holy Spirit has shown me some wonderful new things in that psalm, and I was eager to share them with you.

But I think that in light of this frightening display of human evil this last Wednesday, I ought to call us to a different text. The bombing has triggered a lot of different responses in people.

Anger, desire for revenge, grief, fear. How ought Christians respond to this? How ought the gospelized respond to this?

How ought those upon whom the kingdom of God has come? How ought those who know the power and love of Good Friday and Easter? How ought those in whom the spirit of the living God has come to dwell respond to evil like this?

[1 : 4 0] How ought those in the Lord Jesus? How ought those in the Lord Jesus? Well, in a host of ways. We first of all weep with those who weep. And if we are given the opportunity, we ask those who weep to try to trust the pain to the Lord Jesus.

We pray asking the Father of mercy to give comfort and strength and hope and wisdom. We share in the expression of outrage.

We share in the consensus that such actions cannot be tolerated by a civilized society and that those who do them must suffer justice that is swift and severe.

And in the midst of it all, we do everything we can to steer clear of two powerful temptations that come to us in times of justifiable outrage.

The first temptation is to jump to quick conclusions about who did it and why. The immediate assumption was that this was an act of international terrorism.

[2 : 5 6] More specifically, that this was an act of terrorism by Middle Eastern Islamic radicals. On Thursday, as I drove from place to place, I listened to the talk shows on the radio.

I usually don't. But I did on Thursday to try to get a pulse. And I was alarmed. I was alarmed by the kinds of conclusions already beginning to harden, namely that it was indeed Islamic fundamentalists who did it and that we as a nation needed to retaliate against the nation represented by those quickly and in a big way.

After the announcement on Friday that someone had been arrested and that the someone was a white, male, lifelong American citizen, I could feel the shame rising for having made too hasty a conclusion.

Perhaps a role for the gospelized this week is for us to reach out to our Middle Eastern neighbors and apologize to them for our society so quickly concluding that it was one of theirs who did this.

Part of the outrage, of course, has turned to shame as it now appears that what was thought to be an attack on the heartland of America turns out to be a revelation of a sickness in the heartland of America.

[4 : 40] The second temptation which comes to us in times of justifiable outrage is to let our hearts become like what we hate or fear.

In the face of human evil, it is all too easy to fall into the trap of responding to the evil on evil's terms.

Thus, I invite you to grapple with me with a difficult text from the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew chapter 5, verses 38 to 42. This is a text I had scheduled to preach in about four weeks' time.

It's printed for you on the insert along with the passage that follows that text, Matthew 5, 43 to 48. Matthew 5, 38 to 42, the text we want to look at and the one that follows it, is the high-water mark of the Sermon on the Mount.

It is a text for which John Stott says, the Sermon on the Mount is most respected and most resented. In this text, we discover a major difference between civilized humanity and gospelized humanity.

[6 : 01] If you're able, would you be willing to stand for the reading of God's Word? Jesus is speaking to us here. You've heard that it was said, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also.

Whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him too. Give to him who asks of you and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. Spirit of the living God, long ago you inspired Matthew the tax collector to write these words down for us.

And now I pray, in your mercy and grace, that you would cause these words to come off the page, become alive in our minds and in our spirits, in our spirits, as never before.

For we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen. Please be seated. You have heard it was said, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, but I say to you.

[7 : 14] But I say to you. Here Jesus is working with the oldest, one of the oldest laws of civilization, the so-called lex talionis, the law of just retribution.

It's found in one of the earliest known codes of law, the so-called Code of Hammurabi, written about 2260 B.C. And it is found in the Old Testament in sections of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, which are the so-called case study law or the ordinance law.

So, for example, Exodus 21, verses 22 to 25. If two men are fighting and hit a pregnant woman 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 allows.

But if there is a 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, we need to keep in mind three facts about the Old Testament use of this lex talionis, the eye for eye. First, this stipulation was entrusted to the judges of Israel.

[8 : 36] That is, lex talionis was to be administered by the court. Prior to giving the lex talionis, injury to one member of the family could be avenged by any other member of the family.

The lex talionis took revenge out of private hands and placed it in the public court of law. If revenge was to be taken, it could only be taken by the court.

This law was given to check the tendency in the human heart to take the law into one's own hands. This man who has done the bombing needs to be treated by the court and not by the individuals who would want to get to him.

If I were a father, I would want to get to him. The lex talionis takes revenge out of hand, private hands, and puts it into the public court.

Second, this stipulation was given in order to limit revenge. And as such, it marked an advance for humanity. lex talionis limits the revenge to exact compensation, to the exact equivalent, and no more.

[9 : 54] Punishment must fit the crime, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, no more. Third, this instruction is properly called a permission in the Old Testament.

That is, it's an accommodation to our fallen humanity. It is as though God was saying, 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, not life for foot. But, and this is the crucial thing to realize, from the beginning, it has always been God's will that no human being seek revenge.

Leviticus 19, 2, a central text in the Old Testament, you shall be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy. You shall be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy.

And then in the rest of Leviticus 19, it spells out what it means to be holy like a God until it comes to the culmination of that chapter, verse 18, which reads, do not seek revenge.

[11 : 06] Do not hold a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself, for I am the Lord. This lex talionis, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, was given as a permission to those who could not find it in their heart to not seek revenge.

At least be fair. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth. I think you can then understand what Jesus is doing with the lex talionis in the Sermon on the Mount.

He is calling us to God's prior and more perfect will. Civilized humanity will limit revenge.

Gospelized humanity will not seek it at all. You've heard it was said, an eye for an eye, tooth for tooth. But I tell you, do not resist the one who is evil.

Do not resist. What does Jesus mean here? Does he mean here that we're supposed to stand there and let evil run rampant then?

[12 : 20] I think it's important to note what Jesus does not say in this text. Jesus does not say if someone slaps your brother on the right cheek.

He does not say if someone should force your sister to go another mile. He does not say if someone should take advantage of your child. Jesus here in this text is not calling us to stand by when others are mistreated by evil people.

Jesus also taught us that we are to confront those who are evil, who do wrong. Matthew 18, verse 15, if your brother sins, go to him and reprove him in private, to begin with anyway.

So do not resist cannot mean just stand there when others are treated wrongly. One of the leading Jewish scholars of our time writes that Jesus' command, love your neighbor as yourself, forbids one to stand by immobile and tolerant while the life, dignity, security of one's neighbor is transgressed.

Martin Luther made the point so well. He said, Christ is not saying no one should resist the evil person for that would completely undermine all rule and authority. But this is what he is saying, you, you shall not do this.

[13 : 44] Well, then I ask, is Jesus saying that when we are personally injured by the evil person, we are just to stay there and take it? Is that what he means by do not resist the evil one?

Was Dietrich Bonhoeffer that courageous disciple correct when during the reign of Adolf Hitler he wrote, 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?

Is Jesus calling us then to some kind of passive non-resistance? Was Bonhoeffer right when he concluded his comments on Jesus' words, evil becomes a spent force when there is not a resistance put up to it?

Is that what Jesus means here by do not resist the evil person? Consider the insight of Robert Gulick. Gulick argues that when Jesus works with this lex talionis, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, he brings us into a courtroom setting, into the realm of personal injury law.

Gulick therefore paraphrases Jesus' words this way, you shall not seek legal vindication against the evil person. Now, in light of the four specific life illustrations that Jesus has in this text, only one of which stays with the court setting, I think we need to further paraphrase it this way, I tell you, do not appeal to the lex talionis against an evil person in any way.

[15 : 34] Dale Bruner makes it even more simple. I tell you, do not try to get even with an evil person. Jesus calls us to resist, to resist that deeply, deeply ingrained tendency to want to even the score with evil.

Now, before going any further, I think it is helpful for us to recognize Jesus' realistic appraisal of life in this world. He calls the person who wants to hurt us evil.

That's significant, coming from his mouth. The person who wants to inflict injury is evil. The person's character, the person's purpose, the person's act is evil in Jesus' mind.

Jesus does not have his mind in the sand or in the sky when he calls us to this radically different way of life. It is because Jesus knows how evil evil is that he calls us to this different way.

You have heard it was said eye for eye, tooth for tooth. Don't do it. You'll never catch up. I tell you, do not set yourself against an evil person to get even.

[17 : 04] evil. But is that the end of it? What are we to do then with all this emotional energy which is ignited by this encounter with evil?

Jesus answers that question in the four illustrations in this text. He takes four very real circumstances and then works this principle with them.

Let me do this with you. Let me first of all make sure that we grasp what the real situation is and then let's go back to all four of them and see what Jesus calls us to do.

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

Only a left-handed person can hit the right cheek of a person standing in front of them. What he is speaking about then is the slap with the back of the hand, an intentional act of insult which inflicts greater pain, and humility.

[18 : 17] Illustration two. If someone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let them have your coat as well. Jesus here is not speaking about any old attempt to take one's possessions.

He's talking here about a miscarriage of justice. In that century, most people had only two garments. They were the tunic, this long undershirt that had long sleeves, worn very close to the body, and then the cloak, a loose fitting coat that went over the shirt.

The coat also served as a blanket on a cold night. For most people in that time, that was the only two pieces of clothing they had. To sue a man for his tunic, for his undershirt, was a gross miscarriage of justice.

Illustration three. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Jesus here is not speaking about just any old force walk.

The word translated forces is a military term, and it refers to the Roman soldier's right to commandeer any Jew to carry his pack one mile.

[19 : 31] This is what was happening with Simon of Cyrene, who was pressed into service to carry Jesus' cross. There was this right that any Roman soldier could walk up to a Jew and force the Jew to carry the pack one mile.

It was a degrading act of colonial exploitation. Illustration four. Give to the one who asks you. Do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

Now, after the illustrations about being slain, slapped and unjustly sued and being commandeered by soldiers, this seems rather anticlimactic. But it is not, because as Dale Bruner points out, using this illustration last, Jesus teaches us again that the usual tests of discipleship occur in daily, unheroic circumstances.

Since Jesus is speaking about the evil person, in this fourth illustration then, he's not speaking about any old request. This is a request by someone who is seeking to take advantage of you.

Now, what does the Lord of life call us to do in each of those real life circumstances? If they should happen to us, how are we to respond? Clearly, we are not to try to get even. But is that the end of it?

[20 : 50] Is Jesus saying that we are to passively stand by and let the evil person get their way? No. And I can say no because there is nothing passive in any one of Jesus' illustrations.

Let me say that again. This is the key. There is nothing passive in what Jesus now counsels us to do in those situations. There is nothing passive.

In each case, he is saying, do not try to get even. But he is also saying, instead, go on the offensive. Act in a way that changes the dynamics of this encounter.

What? Well, let's go back through those four illustrations and listen very carefully to how Jesus speaks in each of them. I think there is a lot of misunderstanding about Christian ethics in our time because people are not looking and listening carefully to what he says.

Let's go back through these four illustrations in reverse order. Illustration four. Does Jesus say, as many modern paraphrases have him say, when someone asks you for something, give it to him.

[22 : 09] When someone wants to borrow something, lend it to him. No, he's not saying that because there is no it in the text. There is no it in the text.

St. Augustine pointed out that Jesus does not say give whatever the person asks. What he says is give to the person who asks. To give whatever someone asks is being passive and it can be wrong.

Do you give a child whatever she asks for? Do you give money to someone you know is going to waste it on booze? The focus in this illustration is not on what is asked but on who is asking.

Jesus says give to the one who asks. Not give it to the one. Give to the one who asks. Do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow.

He's dealing here then in relationship with persons. Not in dealing with requests. Go beyond the person's surface request. Discern the real need of the person. Jesus here is not calling us to a passive response to anyone who asks.

[23 : 21] He's calling for an active caring for the person who asks. Are you with me? Are you see the difference? Illustration number which one am I on?

Three. I was going in backward order. It threw me off. Illustration three. Does Jesus say if someone forces you to go one mile let him exploit you for a second mile?

No. Jesus does not say let him make you go a further mile. That would be being passive. Jesus says go with him a second mile.

That's another matter altogether. Before the soldier can exploit you turn the tables. offer to take the oppressor's pack an extra mile. You see when he forces you to carry your pack one mile you're his slave.

But when you volunteer to carry his pack that extra mile you become his master. After the first mile the soldier takes the load off of your pack and begins to put it on his pack.

[24 : 37] You however grab the pack off of his and put it back on your back and he says to you hey I didn't order you to carry the pack an extra mile and you respond I'm not under your orders.

You see how the circumstance changed? Do you see that? It changed dramatically. Illustration two.

Does Jesus say if someone wants to sue you and take your shirt let him sue you for your coat also? No. Jesus does not say let him sue.

That would be being passive. Jesus says let him have your coat. That's a very different matter. Before he can sue you for more give him more.

Beat him to the punch. Crazy? No. It means that you have wrested the offensive from the evil person.

[25 : 43] It means that you have stolen his thunder. You have shifted the ground and engaged the opponent in a battle for which he was not prepared. Are you with me?

Illustration one. Does Jesus say as another modern paraphrase has it if someone slaps you on the right cheek let him slap you on the left also?

No. Jesus does not say let him slap you. That would be passive. Jesus says turn to him the other cheek. That's another matter altogether.

Listen even more carefully. Jesus does not simply say turn the other cheek. That is passive acquiescence. Jesus says turn to him the other cheek. That's active engagement.

It means you have wrested the offenses from the evil person. It means that you have now taken charge of this encounter. It means you're going to get hurt more. But you are now in charge.

[26 : 51] Are you with me? Jesus does not call us to surrender to evil. evil. But to take the initiative and overcome evil with good.

That is Jesus in this passage is calling us to freedom. He's calling us to the freedom of not having our behavior determined by the way we are treated.

E. Stanley Jones whom the Indian Christians call the greatest missionary since the Apostle Paul understands this passage of Scripture better than anyone I know. And in his book The Christ of the Mount written in 1931 Jones asked the question what should be done in each of these cases Jesus gives wherein there is some wrong.

And Jones writes the temptation in each of these cases is to use the weapons of the wrongdoer to fight on his level and to give blow for blow. Don't do it said Jesus for if you do then blows will get blows hate will beget hate and you will find yourself in a vicious cycle.

Get out of it by rising to a higher level and by using higher weapons. Jones goes on allowing a man to smite you on one cheek and letting him have your shirt and submitting to him when he compels you to go one mile does little good at all.

[28 : 18] The fact is it does harm to the man who does it and to the man who submits to it. It's the other cheek, the cloak also, the second mile that does the trick. It is this plus that turns the scale.

The one cheek, the shirt, the one mile, this is passive resistance. But turning the other cheek, giving the cloak, going the second mile, this is active resistance on the plane of unquenchable good will.

Passive resistance may reveal nothing but weakness. This active resistance of love reveals nothing but strength. Jesus here is calling us to do the very thing that he did.

The local police spat upon him. They blindfolded him and they hit him in the face and then the foreign military repeated the insults and injuries.

They thrust a crown of thorns on his head and they put a robe on his back and then they hit him and spit on him. But never once did Jesus respond to them in kind.

[29 : 22] Instead he took the offensive of good will culminating in the cry from the cross, Father forgive them for they know not what they do. Roman soldiers knew power when they saw it.

And one of those stationed at the cross watched as Jesus responded to that evil with good and he got down on his knees and he said certainly this is the son of God.

Power. Again I want to quote from E. Stanley Jones this time from his book on Mahatma Gandhi. The book's entitled Gandhi a Portrait of a Friend written in 1948.

E. Stanley Jones had the privilege of witnessing this Hindu lawyer. Take this section of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount seriously and apply it in India. I read the paragraph I'm going to read to you now on the Sunday after the people power revolution in the Philippines in 1986.

We have had demonstrated before us in this age as clearly as if in a laboratory scientific demonstration that there are three levels of life and that those three levels give certain results.

[30 : 45] The lowest level is where we return evil for good, the demonic level. The next level is where we return good for good, evil for evil, the legalistic level. The highest level is where we return good for evil, the Christian level.

What are the results of living on these levels? Return evil for good and you become evil. Then nothing in the universe backs you. There's some total of realities against you. You quickly or slowly perish but perish you will.

Return good for good and evil for evil and you become an eye for eye, tooth for tooth person. The other person's conduct determines yours. You get your code of conduct from the actions 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 own level and there is war. Return good for evil and it leads to your ennobling and to the possible redemption of the wrongdoer.

[31 : 53] In the case that the wrongdoer is not redeemed, nevertheless, you are stronger. Boy, that's a stirring paragraph. Did you hear that phrase, you are an echo?

Return good for good, evil for evil, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, snub for snub, insult for insult, put down for put down, and you are only an echo. Jesus is teaching us in this passage that when his gospel gets hold of a person, the person is no longer an echo of other person's behavior.

And he's teaching us that when a society, when a gospel gets hold of a society, the society is no longer an echo of other societies either.

The inbreaking kingdom of God, the infusion of the Holy Spirit lifts a person and a society to a higher level. I conclude with one more reading from E.

Stanley Jones. It's his evaluation of these three levels of life. The first level, he says, is pure weakness. The second level is pseudo-power and pure weakness.

[33 : 19] The third level is pure power. Any individual, group, or nation that adopts it will be invincible. So, in the days to come, as we share in the grief and the anger, the justifiable outrage and the fear, Lord Jesus, please gospelize us so that we do not become an echo of the evil we deplore.