

Breaking the Cycle of Violence

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Matthew 5:38-48

It was about 77 years ago that the nuclear bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing over 200,000 people. In spite of the horror and indiscriminate nature of nuclear bombs, governments continue to build more and more powerful nuclear weapons. Thankfully, since World War II they have not been used. Yet, wars continue. With the Russian invasion of the Ukraine, war has come “close to home,” and many fear the future. Most people will say that they are against war. Of course, who would be pro-war? Some people believe that war can be “just,” if certain rules are followed, rules such as that there needs to be a legitimate reason, there must be a reasonable probability of success, and the use of force must not cause greater harm than the evil that is to be stopped. The problem is that governments have always come up with reasons to go to war whenever they want, and the fact is, no one can predict the outcome of war. Most Christians would say that we need to love and forgive, rather than fight. But, we are faced with a serious question if we believe that war may be necessary as a “last resort” in certain situations. If we look at the example of Jesus, we know that he was definitely non-violent.

If we want wars to stop, we need to begin with the conflicts we find in the personal relationships around us. In today’s passage from the book of Matthew, Jesus gives us instructions as to how we are to live in relationship with our enemies, or those who unjustly challenge us. Over all, in this chapter, Jesus gives six sets of sayings where he says, “You have heard that it was said...But I say...” Some may think that Jesus was saying that God’s old laws were now to be replaced with Jesus’ commands, but Jesus clarifies in verse 17 that he has not come to replace the law. “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill...” Jesus is showing the original intent of God’s laws.

In ancient Israel they believed in a rule called “lex talionis”, or the law of retaliation. It was meant to emphasise that those who are injured have a right to compensation, and any punishment should fit the crime. So, for example, through Moses they had the law of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” This kept people from getting carried away. If you’re in a fight and someone knocks out one of your teeth, you don’t have the right to kill the other person and burn down his village. The retaliation had to be no more than a tooth. Of course, people then began to put money amounts on the compensation required, instead of requiring the offender to also be injured. In many ways, our society today tries to work on a similar principle to “lex talionis”. The punishment must fit the crime.

But, Jesus knew that it is easy for violence to escalate. If someone hits you, you may hit back in retaliation. But then, the other person may think you hit a bit harder than he did, so he hits back again a little harder, and so on. You know how it goes. So, Jesus gives us a way to stop the downward spiral of violence. He says, “Do not resist an evildoer.” In other words, don’t insist on your rights as the one who was hurt. Don’t retaliate. Instead, “...if anyone strikes you on the right cheek turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile...” These are creative ways to stop the back and forth of retaliation.

A slap to the right cheek would have likely been done with the back of the right hand. This is the way a superior person would slap a subordinate – extremely insulting. If one were to turn one’s left cheek, the other person would be forced to slap with the front of their hand if they want to slap again. It would be the way people of equal status may slap each other. In other words, the slapper would likely be perplexed as to what to do in this situation.

If someone takes a man’s shirt, in giving his cloak as well, he’d be left naked. It is actually embarrassing for the one holding the clothes. It is uncaring to take everything, since the person would have nothing to cover themselves at night. Usually, the cloak would be used as a blanket. It’s another creative way to respond.

Soldiers had the right to force people to carry their pack for up to 1,500 metres, in going further, you may have a situation where the soldier is trying to get his pack back because he is actually not allowed to force people to go more than the 1,500 metres.

Jesus was giving these examples as ideas to help people think about what they could do instead of retaliation. They open up the possibility of stopping the violence rather than paying back with angry words or actions. In Romans 12:20-21 the Apostle Paul says, "...if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Jesus says instead of loving your neighbour and hating your enemy, our love needs to extend even to our enemies. There is actually nowhere in the Jewish scriptures that says one must hate their enemy, but people sometimes defined their neighbours as only those within their community. That left things open for them to hate those who were outside of their community. As in the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus says that we are neighbours with those outside our community as well as those within. We are to care for even our enemies.

Some people think that caring for enemies was only taught through Jesus, but already in the Old Testament we can see places where God commands people to give care to their enemies. I'm reading from Exodus chapter 23, verse 4 and 5... "When you come upon your enemy's ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back. When you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden and you would hold back from setting it free, you must help to set it free." Peacemakers show care for even their enemies, because God cares for them.

I feel strongly against using violence to solve any problem. Yet, I still enjoy exciting action movies. I notice that I can get caught up while watching these movies. I usually breathe a sigh of relief when the "bad person" finally gets killed. So, I understand the feeling victims have when they desire the offender to be executed, even though I am actually against the idea of taking even a supposedly "bad" person's life. We then rob them of the possibility of someday turning to the way of Christ. We usually don't take time to think about the offender's situation. What were the conditions that brought him or her to the point of killing people? Were there family members that loved that person? Is there someone that person loves? Jesus teaches that we are to treat our "enemies" as real people who are just like us. In fact, we are all influenced by sin in our hearts. Under certain conditions, any one of us could become the "bad guy."

Have you ever been in a situation where you're angry because someone has hurt you in some way? And then, that person accuses you of wrongdoing? Following the law of retaliation, you might start fighting back and forth, and the problem may get worse. I notice that sometimes, in an argument, the more I try to explain and justify myself, the worse things seem to get. Have you ever been trapped in an argument like that? Now, imagine one side letting go of trying to justify, and instead changing their attitude and admitting a weakness. Have you ever had an argument or conflict where the other person suddenly admits to having a part in the problem? "Well, I actually could have done better in that situation. I'm sorry I didn't think of your feelings..." How does it feel to hear something like that? If Rie says something like that to me during an argument, I suddenly feel like I have no more ammunition for fighting. I no longer need to defend myself. Suddenly, I feel like saying, "Well, I could have also done better. I wasn't thinking enough about your feelings either." Suddenly, instead of getting worse and worse, the downward cycle has been stopped, and it feels like there is now room to talk about where both of us can improve. I think this is a little like what Jesus was talking about when he says we are to find ways to care for those who cause us stress, letting go of our right to fight back.

At the end of today's passage from Matthew, Jesus says, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." The meaning here is not that we are not to have any faults. It's more like being complete or fully developed. Being perfect as God is perfect means to love as God loves, caring for all

people. It's important, though, to remember that the point is not that we need to work hard to follow God's ways. We must remember that it's through a relationship with Jesus Christ that we can find the energy to possibly love, even our enemies. In Matthew 11:28-30 Jesus says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." We need to start with our relationship with the One who died and rose again, the One who showed us how to live without violence, the one whose Spirit continues to work in us. Let's pray.

Loving God, through your Son, Jesus, we see your way of love, even for enemies. O Lord, we struggle with conflicts all around us. Nuclear weapons are still in the world. There continue to be people who suffer in wars and conflicts around the world. We confess that even in our families and community there are often challenges with conflict. O Lord, have mercy. Grant us the strength to first show love rather than focusing on justifying ourselves when we're challenged in relationships. We pray for the wisdom to find creative ways to be proactive in caring for others, rather than just giving in, or fighting back. We pray this through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.