

Sermon 20, Generosity, Not Revenge, Matthew 5:38-42

Bulletin verse: Proverbs 19:17

As Gandhi taught, "The first principle of nonviolent action is that of noncooperation with everything humiliating." W.Wink, "Beyond Just War and Pacifism: Jesus' Nonviolent Way"

Preliminary Outline

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Proposition: Revenge belongs to God and the state; Christians personally fight evil not by revenge but by meekness and generosity.

The law of God says to overcome evil with good. Specifically, the two goods with which you can and must overcome evil are meekness and generosity. Christ is not commanding pacifism, or saying that every form of violence is intrinsically evil. He is talking about interpersonal relationships, and especially relationships within an unjust social order. How does one obey the law of God when being sued, struck, and coerced? By meekness and generosity — not by violence, revenge, and the taking of an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth.

Final Outline

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 - A. Moses Capped Civil Penalties, Exodus 21:22-25
 - B. The Pharisees' Interpretation
 - 1. It Is a Sin to Let Someone Get Away With Assault
 - 2. If Someone Hurts You, Hurt Him Back!

C. Moses' Actual Meaning

1. In the Administration of Justice, no Penalty Greater than the Crime May Be Imposed, Lev. 24:17-22
2. Personal Vengeance Is Unlawful, Lev. 19:18, Prov. 20:22
3. Vengeance Belongs to God, Deut. 32:34-36

II. Jesus' "Yes, And:" Fight Evil with Virtue, Not Vengeance, vv. 39-42

A. Do Not Rise up Against Evil, vv. 39-41 (cf. James 4:7 with 2 Pet. 2:10-11 and Romans 12:13-21)

1. Show by Your Meekness that Insults Do Not Humiliate You, v. 39b
2. Expose the Thief's Rapaciousness by Your Generosity, v. 40
3. Neutralize Coercion by Your Willing Service, v. 41

B. Show Generosity All the Time, v. 42 (cf. Deut. 15:7-8)

1. Give/Lend/Share what You Have, Not What You Don't Have, Acts 3:3-6
2. You Have Untold Spiritual Wealth; Share It!, 2 Cor. 6:10

Proposition: The law of God requires that you resist evil not with sinful anger or tit-for-tat revenge, but by showing the virtue opposed to the evil visited on you. God commands you to respond to evil with goodness, not with angry vengeance.

Today we come to the most difficult part of the Sermon on the Mount. Yes, the passage on divorce has been a source of grief throughout the centuries. Yes, the teaching about the narrow way and the strait gate is hard to hear. But as far as I can tell, the passage before us this morning is the most difficult to interpret of the entire sermon. In my judgment, not a single commentator of the fifteen I read fully captured the meaning of the text. Many of them had excellent insights, and without them I would not have been able to write this sermon. It would have been a much worse sermon than it is! Nonetheless, I differ with all of them, to greater or lesser degrees.

Why should you listen, then? Well, certainly to satisfy your intellectual curiosity. I hope you've been wondering for weeks what I would say about this passage. To tell you the truth, I've been wondering myself. But more than that, you ought to listen because this passage contains key instructions for daily life. Jesus is not talking about what occupation you ought to pursue, or de-legitimizing the profession of those of you who work in the legal and law-enforcement fields. Not at all. Rather, He's getting at something much more basic. All of us, cops, parents, pre-schoolers, and retail sales associates alike, confront evil on a daily basis. Jesus is here laying down principles for what to do about that evil. And these principles apply not just to the detective confronting the crook, or the judge handing down a sentence, but also to the child in the sandbox and the college student in the summer job. You see, the point of this passage is not pacifism. It's not non-violence. It's not letting yourself be bankrupted to keep bums supplied with alcohol. No, the point of this passage is that virtue is the correct response to sin. Doing the right thing, showing the appropriate virtue, is the key to overcoming evil in daily life. Not only

does angry vengeance not work; it is a sin. Evil must be, can only be, dealt with by superior *goodness*. That's the message of this passage, and (on a far greater scale) it is the message of the Cross. When evil is perpetrated on you, respond with goodness. That is the principle Jesus lays down, and that is the teaching of the examples He provides. This sermon gets right down to the nitty-gritty details of daily life. Yes, this teaching is hard. But it is supremely realistic. The only right response to evil is goodness.

I. The Law: Legal Vengeance Must Be No Greater than the Injury, v. 38

We pick up the text, then, at verse 38, in which Jesus states the 5th antithesis. Remember, in the other four He has cleared the Mosaic law of misinterpretation and presented its true meaning. One must live according to this true meaning of the law to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. All six of Jesus' interpretations are mandatory and binding for the Christian.

This particular law is a fragment of a judicial law. Come with me back to Ex. 21.

A. Moses Capped Civil Penalties, Exodus 21:22-25

As you may remember from two weeks ago, this chapter provides the foundational OT teaching on divorce. It also contains foundational teaching on the administration of justice. What are you supposed to do if harm follows? If there's a fight and someone gets hurt, what do you do? Well, you impose as a penalty the same thing that the bad guy did. If he took out an eye, he loses an eye. Basically, this law is a guideline for justice. As a magistrate in ancient Israel, you could impose a fine for starting a fight. But if someone got hurt, this is a maximum sentencing law. You may not do any more than this. You can do less; you can impose a fine, according to the end of v. 22 and the logical implications of the scenario — but you may not do more. What do I mean? Well, the text says "Her children come out." If you're fighting and you hit a pregnant woman so that she gives birth to twins prematurely and both her children die, then you can only have one life taken away. You technically owe two lives, but it is in accordance with justice for you to forfeit only one. The law allows for a lesser sentence. What it doesn't allow is for a greater sentence. If you cripple that little baby in one foot, your foot can be taken, but not both your feet. And so on. So as you can see, this is a maximum sentencing law. Moses capped civil penalties with this concise, memorable formula.

B. The Pharisees' Interpretation

1. It Is a Sin to Let Someone Get Away With Assault

In accordance with what we've seen of Pharisaical legalism already in this chapter, though, it would seem that the Pharisees interpreted Moses not as giving a maximum sentencing law, but as giving a mandatory retribution law. If someone hurts you, you have got to prosecute him to the full extent of the law. It's what Moses commanded!

2. If Someone Hurts You, Hurt Him Back!

And thus, whether in private revenge or in a public courtroom setting, the Pharisees' interpretation was that you had a legal responsibility to hurt anyone who hurt you. If someone takes from you, take back from him. If someone maims you, maim him. That's only right. In

fact, failure to maim him could have been taken as an injustice. As other societies expected that gentlemen would fight duels over an insulting word and kill to retain their “honor,” so the Pharisees may have expected that if someone deliberately attacked you, you were socially required to attack right back.

C. Moses’ Actual Meaning

But that’s not what Moses meant at all. Come with me to a couple of other passages where we can see this quickly.

1. In the Administration of Justice, no Penalty Greater than the Crime May Be Imposed, Lev. 24:17-22

The principle already given in Exodus is repeated here, with additions. The basic idea is clearly that legally, whatever you do, you are liable to have it done back to you. If you wreck my car, you need to get me another car. If you break my arm in an assault, you are liable to have the magistrate sentence you to have your arm broken. But regardless, one clear implication is that the penalty may not, under any circumstances, be greater than the crime.

2. Personal Vengeance Is Unlawful, Lev. 19:18, Prov. 20:22

However, that the laws of Ex. 21 and Lev. 24 applied to the magistrates is only too clear from Lev. 19:18, which forbids private revenge. Solomon repeats this command four centuries later, saying that God will save you. You need repay evil for evil done to you. In fact, you may not; Moses commanded that it not be done.

3. Vengeance Belongs to God, Deut. 32:34-36

Moses also taught that God would take vengeance. This passage may be familiar to you as the text of the most famous sermon ever preached in Massachusetts, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” We won’t get into that, but know that God clearly claims that vengeance belongs to Him, not to you. You may not repay evil with evil. You may not break the arm of the guy who broke your arm, or kill the child of the man who killed your child. That prerogative belongs to God alone. As I mentioned a few weeks ago, none of us thinks that borrowing the President’s limousine and taking it for a joyride around D.C. would be met with a laugh and a slap on the wrist from the Secret Service. Well, believe me, God is just as jealous of His possessions and prerogatives as Mr. Obama is of his.

II. Jesus’ “Yes, And:” Fight Evil with Virtue, Not Vengeance, vv. 39-42

Well, once more, as in the previous four cases, Jesus is not saying anything different than Moses said. Far from it. Rather, Jesus is saying the same things Moses said, and explaining more clearly what Moses meant all along. What is that? Well, Moses and Jesus both say not to fight evil with vengeance. Jesus adds, echoed by Paul, James, and Peter, that you must actually fight evil with good. (Solomon had added the same thing, a thousand years before; see Proverbs 25:21-22).

A. Do Not Rise up Against Evil, vv. 39-41 (cf. James 4:7 with 2 Pet. 2:10-11 and Romans 12:13-21)

Now, before we talk about the examples, we need to get into this extraordinary, and extraordinarily puzzling, statement. “Do not resist the evil person,” says Jesus. That’s how all the

English and Latin translations render it. The Greek word is clear; it means “resist.” Etymologically, it’s a compound of “against (anti-)” and “stand.” “Do not stand against evil,” Jesus says.

How is that even possible? Could Jesus really be telling us to be passive in the face of evil? The first place my mind goes is not to an active shooter or an evil empire, but to the everyday business of parenting. “Go ahead, Junior, eat the whole tub of ice cream. I won’t stand in your way. Go ahead and bite your sister; I can’t resist evil. Go ahead and run in the street; I can’t stop you.” This is ludicrous! I cannot believe that Jesus is really, in absolute terms, forbidding me to resist evil. Anyway, Scripture tells us to resist evil, with the very same word. James 4:7 says to *resist* the Devil. Ephesians 6 says that when you’re wearing the armor of God you’ll be able to stand (same word in Gk.) in the evil day. God positively tells us to stand against evil, whether in the person of Satan or in the events of the “evil day.” To let your child do whatever he wants in the name of this verse isn’t Biblical parenting; it’s insanity! You cops, lawyers, and judges out there — to let pervers, crooks, murderers, and other kinds of criminals go free on the basis of this verse is not Biblical government; it’s a travesty!

So we know that Jesus doesn’t literally mean that we can never resist evil. He clearly commands otherwise elsewhere in Scripture. Besides, to never resist evil would ensure the ruination of the human race in very little time. We would never have made it this far if people had taken this command literally.

And so, I want to slightly redefine “resist.” I think it means “rise against.” That is the etymological meaning of the word. The same word in Greek is also used to translate the Hebrew for “proud defiance” in Jer. 50:29 (Jer. 27:29 LXX). Based on that example, I believe that within the range of meaning of “resist” is “proudly defy,” or “rise against.” Based on the translation in Jeremiah 50, plus the three examples Jesus gives and universal consensus of the rest of Scripture, we cannot understand *anthistemi* to mean “resist” here. Rather, it means “rise against.” You know what I’m talking about. It’s that moment when something snaps inside and anger rises in you. That’s the response to evil that Jesus forbids. You may not get mad and respond to evil with unrighteous anger. (Remember, unrighteous anger is any and all anger that motivates you to do something wrong.)

James says to resist the devil; Peter says that angels don’t get angry and yell at the Devil. They don’t pronounce a “railing accusation” against him. Neither should you. In fact, you must respond calmly, with good, to any evil the Devil perpetrates against you. That’s the message of Scripture. Paul says the same thing: don’t be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good!

Think about this definition in the context of parenting. Do not rise up against the evildoer, Jesus says. In other words, when your child is trying to throw her peas on the floor, don’t get angry, yell, scream, and take revenge. Rather, calmly correct her wrongdoing.

Understood this way, Jesus’ statement fits both our moral intuitions and the commands of the rest of Scripture. Don’t rise up in anger against evil, whether in parenting, enduring humiliation, being stolen from, or any other scenario. You may never react vengefully, no matter

how provoked you have been. That's what Jesus is talking about here. If someone takes out your eye, don't reach over and take out his eye. React calmly, meekly, gently.

Now, let's look at Jesus' examples and see whether they bear out this reading of "do not resist an evil person."

1. Show by Your Meekness that Insults Do Not Humiliate You, v. 39b

What's the situation envisaged here? Why does Jesus mention the right cheek? Because He's talking about being backhanded. The right hand naturally backhands the right cheek of a person facing the slapper. In that day as in ours, being backhanded was not dangerous. It probably would hurt, but it probably would not knock you out or kill you. Its main function was to humiliate, to establish dominance, to make the victim cringe in fear. A man could backhand a slave or a woman; a Roman could backhand a Jew; etc. Well, envision the situation with me, if you would. I've been backhanded, so I calmly raise my head and turn my other cheek toward the Roman occupier.

Is this a posture of submission? Is this a way of demonstrating total passivity in the face of evil? Of course not! This is a posture of quiet defiance. This is a way of saying, "You just backhanded me. You can't backhand me with your right again; my right cheek is out of harm's way. I give you permission to hit me, if you so choose — but it will be evident to you, as you do so, that you are hitting a fellow human being. Rather than getting afraid or getting angry, I instead choose to be meek. I simultaneously expose myself to being backhanded from the other side, and assert that it is through meekness that I am responding to your assault on my dignity."

In other words, this is not a way of letting the evildoer walk all over you. This is a way of saying to him, "I am responding to your attempted show of dominance by quietly letting you know that it didn't work. I defy you to take advantage of my meekness."

Some will take advantage of your meekness; Jesus says that's okay. The point is that *you* did the right thing. You refused to let the assailant take your personhood, and you also refused to retaliate on his level.

We react instinctively against these kinds of methods because they have been so abused by self-righteous people. You have probably tried to have a conversation that you needed to have with someone who refused to admit any wrongdoing. That person's "turning the other cheek," his attitude of "go ahead, beat me up, you villain. You can't take my personhood because I'm meeker and holier than you are!" is repulsive. But the abuse of this method by self-righteous people doesn't take away its use. Jesus says that when you are unjustly assaulted, meek, quiet defiance is the proper reaction. You resist evil by being good. Only, it can't be a pose or an act. It has to be the real deal.

2. Expose the Thief's Rapaciousness by Your Generosity, v. 40

Second, you must expose the thief's rapaciousness by your generosity. Picture the courtroom scene. Under Jewish law, no one could take your cloak. But your giving it to the person suing you effectively says, "You can't take anything from me, because I'm willing to freely give it to you." You then march out of the courtroom naked. The message is clear: "You are stealing

everything from me, but I will stop you from stealing it. I will give it to you, thus simultaneously displaying my generosity and your unbelievable greed.” Again, this method smacks of self-righteousness because that’s where we’ve seen it used. But in itself, the method is neutral. It is a way of resisting evil with good. Resist theft by generosity. No one should be able to steal from you if you’re a child of God. Again, I remind you, this must be real. It can’t be a pose. It can’t be self-righteousness. It has to be true righteousness. Remember the bishop in *Les Mis* who gave Jean Valjean the silver candlesticks. Remember? “You must use this precious silver to become an honest man . . . I have saved your soul for God,” the Bishop sings in the Boublil/Shoenberg musical. That is exactly what Jesus is saying here. Generosity, the virtue which opposes the vice of greed, is the way to overcome that greed that takes everything you have.

But what if you lose everything? What if someone is suing you for some massive fine because you refused to bake a cake for a homosexual mirage? As I understand it, at least one of those Christian bakers has given a free cake to his assailants. That’s the kind of thing Jesus is talking about here. If they take your business, the point is not to throw your home in too. Rather, the point is that your generosity should shame their greed.

3. Neutralize Coercion by Your Willing Service, v. 41

The same is true in this last illustration. Our world is very concerned about the plight of the colonized. What kind of distress does it put a people group in when foreigners come and subjugate them and govern them, maybe for centuries? Jesus teaches us how to behave towards colonizers, whether the hated Romans of His day or other colonial powers. Neutralize their coercion by your generosity. By law, a soldier could compel a Jew to carry his pack for one mile (actually, a Roman mile, 92% of an American mile). That was it. But by voluntarily serving the oppressor, you both reclaim your dignity and neutralize his threats. You show the soldier that force is not necessary; love works better. You needn’t scare me into helping you; I will do it for nothing, for love, for obedience to King Jesus. This kind of thing takes too much real work for the self-righteous to corrupt it like they have the other techniques. But again, it demonstrates to the agent of the colonial power that friendship and charity trump force and violence.

Now, as I picture all three scenarios Jesus describes, I see the Christian resisting evil by taking Jesus at His word. You resist evil by meekness, by generosity, by willing service. If you do what He says, then you are resisting evil — but you’re not rising against it in anger and revenge. You’re not preventing someone from stealing your clothes by burning down his house when he’s not looking. You’re not preventing someone from coercing you by shooting him in the back of the head before he can make you carry his pack. No. You are instead overcoming evil with good. You’re leaving open the opportunity to witness about Jesus. You’re preventing the other person from sinning by refusing to let him degrade you, steal from you, or coerce you. All of this is how Christians ought to behave. When your kids act up, don’t beat them up; instead, lovingly chasten them and restore them to the right path. Jesus here names techniques that work when the balance of power is the other way, when you’re the underdog and you know it. A

policeman is not supposed to turn the other cheek to a criminal. Nor is he to get angry and beat up the criminal just because the guy is in his power. The policeman corrects the criminal not by subtle techniques but by coercion — and the criminal, on his part, can (if he so chooses) come along of his own free will, so that he won't need to be slapped and coerced.

Jesus says not to resist evil by evil, but by good, all the time, in your daily life. If I asked your spouse and kids, what would they say? Would they say you do this? Would they say that you uniformly demonstrate meekness, generosity, and willing service, even when extraordinarily provoked? I hope so. I hope my spouse would say that about me. Because the bottom line is this: Jesus commands us to resist evil not with anger and vengeance, but with unbroken goodness.

B. Show Generosity All the Time, v. 42 (cf. Deut. 15:7-8)

Finally, this verse, closing out the section, gives the other way of fighting evil. That is by generosity. Just as Moses commanded, you must give, lend, and share with those in need, especially Christian brothers.

1. Give/Lend/Share what You Have, Not What You Don't Have, Acts 3:3-6

This is not a command that we bankrupt ourselves. Peter didn't give to this man who asked from him — at least, he didn't give him money. He didn't have any. Now, obviously Peter wasn't starving. He theoretically could have sold his clothes, or his boat, or his house, or something like that, so that he could give silver and gold to this man. But because he was an apostle, we consider his example worth following. He shared what he had with this beggar man.

I believe that the same applies to Christians today. You are not obligated to liquidate your assets or re-budget your money so that you can give to someone who asks exactly what he asks for. But if you have something, you are obligated to share it with someone who asks. If you are eating a snack and someone asks for some, share. If you are eating dinner and someone comes to your doorstep asking for some food, share. I know people who take a homeless person out for McDonald's every time they travel on business. The bottom line is that if you're enjoying it and someone asks to partake, you should share. That doesn't mean loaning your car to all and sundry, but if you're riding somewhere and someone asks you for a ride, all other things being equal, you should share that ride! Now, the sixth commandment tells us that we must exert all lawful endeavors to preserve our own life and the lives of others. If you have reason to believe that the person asking to share your ride or share your dinner intends to murder you, then you ought to take steps to protect yourself. That may include not sharing, because it is very important that you not needlessly expose your life to danger. But in any case, as I read it, Jesus is not commanding us to give away everything we have. He is commanding us to do as Peter did: if you have something you personally are enjoying, and someone asks for some, share it. You don't have to do for that person something you don't do for yourself; you're not obligated to rent a motel room for someone who asks, for instance. But if you have a room in your home and someone asks to stay with you, all other things being equal (i.e., you have no reason to believe that sharing with this person will endanger your life or property) share!

Generosity is especially to be directed to fellow believers. If someone in this church is in need, and we don't help him, then we are bad Christians. Regardless of how good our doctrine is, if we are letting a brother or sister starve, we are not fulfilling our obligations.

Generosity is also to be given to outsiders. But again, it is to be along the lines of helping them become self-sufficient. That is the clear teaching of Scripture. Yes, we need to give. But we may not subsidize.

Why is it rude to ask people for things — say, to invite yourself to someone's house for lunch, or to ask if you can have some of their snack? Because the person has a moral obligation to give you some if you ask. That's why.

So don't lend beyond your means. If someone asks you to float him 25 dollars, and you can probably spare the money, lend it! On the other hand, if you will be encouraging him in irresponsibility or enabling some bad habit or wicked action, don't do it. Jesus' words about generosity are meant to do good, not to do evil. But if someone asks you to float him \$25,000, then again, don't loan it unless you can spare the money. Don't be like the guy D.A. Carson knew who was starving while supplying six bums with alcohol.

Peter gave what he had. What he had was the power of God to salvation. Guess what? You have the same power.

2. You Have Untold Spiritual Wealth; Share It!, 2 Cor. 6:10

Paul is talking about the ministry here, but his words apply to every believer. You may be poor, but you can make many rich. You might have nothing, but in Christ you possess all things. So even if you live on dry beans, and no one ever asks to share your physical food, you have spiritual wealth. You know the way of salvation. You know the God who saves. So share that wealth, as Peter did. Don't keep it to yourself.

Part of the reason you respond to evil with good is so that the way will remain open for the word of God to prosper. You will never win to Christ someone you beat up and revenge yourself on. But if you carefully avoid vengeance, and always shows generosity and meekness, then you will retain the ability to speak truth to that person.

Beloved brothers and sisters, do you resist evil with good? Do you show meekness, humbly serve, and give generously to those who ask and to those who try to take? That is what a true Christian is supposed to do. You should never be motivated by vengeful anger. You should always be motivated by a sincere love for your enemies, one which desires the best for them.

How is all this even possible? Only by the grace of God. Christ gave Himself for us. He promises to provide for everyone who trusts in Him.

Don't think you can be the person described here without the grace of God. You can't. Unless you're united to Christ by faith, this passage is totally unrealistic. You can only have a self-righteous shadow of what Jesus was talking about. But if you are a Christian, you can do this. You can live generously and meekly in the face of evil, even of dominant evil. Jesus did. In fact, His response to overwhelming evil was to go and let it kill Him so that He could stop it. The

power of His death is what makes it possible for you to overcome evil with good. So let's do it, by the grace of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.