

Hard Sayings of Jesus:
Turn the Other Cheek/Love Your Enemies
July 7, 2019

I remember being at a social event and meeting the husband of a woman I knew. He had been told what my last name was, and when I introduced myself to him, he decided to make fun of my name. I was not happy, and felt the blood rush to my brain. My hand came close to shooting up to give him a Dutch rub. Biologists talk about a part of our brain that is more reptilian, that is more instinctive. It's part of a fight or flight response that helped us survive in dangerous situations. It's why we react the way we do when we feel attacked. I really wanted to get back at him.

Maybe it's those kind of situations we think of when we hear the phrase, Turn the other cheek. When somebody insults me, what do I do? When I feel attacked in an email, how do I respond? What would I do if a bully attacks me on the playground? If I get hit verbally or physically or emotionally, do I say, Go ahead and hit me again? What does it mean to turn the other cheek? This is one of those hard sayings of Jesus that I am starting this series off with.

This part of Matthew is in what we call the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Jesus is sharing with his disciples and with the crowds what the reign of God looks like, and what it acts like. He is stretching the Law of Moses, he's deepening it. So he starts off with a portion of Leviticus. What he does in the sermon is to say, "You've heard such and such, but I say to you," and then he deepens the command. So he says this: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'" (Matthew 5:38) He is quoting from Leviticus, which says: "Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered." Leviticus (24:19-20).

This law is called Lex Talionis, which means the law of the same, or the law of retaliation. And it might sound barbaric to us, but it was really meant to measure out retaliation. In the ancient world, when somebody in an enemy village was injured, sometimes the revenge was killing everybody in that village that had done the injuring. There was no sense of proportionate justice.

So this law was a limitation on revenge. If someone takes out your eye, you can't level an entire village, you can only take their eye out. In the civil law,

we punish people according to the severity of what they have done. Hopefully, there is a sense of equal proportion. But Jesus is talking about relationships here. He says I don't want you to simply give back the wrongdoing that has been dished out to you.

Evolutionarily, we are programmed for one of two responses: fight or flight. We'll either respond with aggression, with violence, or we will run. Aggression or passivity. Jesus wants us to take a third way, neither violence nor passivity in the face of evil. He advocates assertive non-violence. He says, You've heard it said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. In other words, you've heard that you can respond to violence with violence, as long as it is proportionate.

But I say to you, "Do not resist an evildoer." This has been misunderstood. It sounds like he wants us to just let evil people have their way. That's not what Jesus means. He wants people to be transformed, so how would it help to simply let people do the evil they do? The Greek word resist implies to resist *violently*. So Jesus says, I want you to have a response, but not one of violence. In other words, if someone does evil to you, don't respond in the same way. Don't let the opponent dictate the terms of the engagement. Be creative. Find another way to respond.

Then he gives this famous example: "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also..." (Matt. 5:39b) It sounds like followers of Jesus are simply supposed to roll over, to be a carpet, to let themselves get beat up and to ask for more. I don't believe this is what Jesus means.

Let me say first of all, Jesus is not talking about spouses who are being abused, who then are supposed to say, Hit me again, either physically or verbally or emotionally. There have been women, and sometimes men, who thought they were following Jesus by putting up with abuse, and this is certainly not what he means.

So what could it mean to turn the other cheek? Let's think about the choreography of this. Jesus says, If anyone strikes you on the right cheek...I need a volunteer. OK, so in a right-handed world, if you threw a punch at me, you would hit my left cheek. And it would be striking with the right hand, because the left hand was only used for unclean acts. You would never use the left hand to hit someone. If you want to strike me on the right cheek, how would you do that? Right, it's a backhand, which is an insult.

The backhand was meant to insult someone, to humiliate someone, to degrade someone. This was not between equals, but a backhand was for somebody who was an inferior. In the world of Jesus, this was master to slave; husband to wife; parents to children; Romans to Jews. You were forcing someone who was out of line to get back into place.

So Jesus was saying to these people who were treated as inferiors: Refuse to accept this kind of treatment anymore. If they backhand you, turn the other cheek, as if to point out how ridiculous this is. And if you try to do this, you realize it's impossible to backhand this person on the other cheek. The nose gets in the way. But you say, You could punch somebody with the right hand, but you didn't do that with an inferior person. Only equals fought with fists. A superior would not want to treat an inferior person as an equal. You only wanted to backhand this person.

So by turning the other cheek, by showing how ridiculous this is, the inferior person is actively resisting this treatment. The inferior person is making a scene out of this. The inferior person is saying, I'm a human being too. I am a child of God, which makes me equal to you.

So notice how Jesus finds a third way here. This is not flight, and this is not violence. This is a subversive, active resistance. Now, it doesn't mean anything bad won't happen. The master might have the servant flogged. But the point has been made. And when large numbers of people start doing this, you have the makings of a social revolution.

Remember, this is a world of honor and shame. And when an inferior does this, it throws the balance off. The superior has not been able to inflict shame on the subordinate. You see how this is very different than simply being a carpet and saying, hit me again. This is meant to expose the absurdity of the powers that have had their way.

Then Jesus gives a second example of assertive non-violence. Jesus says, If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well. Again, it sounds like, Just be passive and give in to a lawsuit, and hand over even more than someone sued you for. But here is what is going on, and what Jesus is doing here. A poor person only had two items of clothing: an outer, thick long robe and an inner robe. The law in Deuteronomy said that a creditor could take as a collateral for a loan the outer garment, but it needed to be returned to the poor man at night so he wouldn't freeze.

Indebtedness was a huge problem in Jesus' day. This wasn't because people were making bad choices. This had to do with Roman rule. Rome taxed everybody heavily to pay for their armies. They taxed wealthy people especially, so if you were in the top 1%, you tried to hide your wealth in non-liquid assets, the favorite being land.

But land was passed along generationally from family to family. So if you could get a family indebted, you could get their land. The wealthy began to charge landowners exorbitant interest rates that they would eventually not be able to repay, and it would drive them off their land. The creditor would sue the landowner, and would take the outer robe as collateral.

So Jesus says to these peasant farmers who are about to have their land taken away through unscrupulous means: If they take your outer coat, make a scene and give them your inner coat as well. In that culture, nakedness did not shame you as much as it shamed the people looking at you (remember when Noah is found naked by his son Ham, and Ham is punished for it; Genesis 9:20-27).

So Jesus is saying, walk out of court naked! That will make a statement- that will expose this system for what it is- And the creditor would be exposed for being who he is, with an outer coat in one hand and an inner coat in the other. Look how greedy he is, people would say, taking everything from this poor man. And this would help expose this whole system that was causing people to lose their land. Again this is not flight from the problem, and it is not violently trying to overthrow the system. It is creative, non-violent resistance.

Here is the third example. Jesus says, If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. A Roman soldier could tap the shoulder of a Jewish citizen and force the citizen to carry his stuff, which weighed 60-85 pounds, not including weapons. But military law said that the citizen only had to carry the gear for one mile.

And if a soldier disobeyed this part of the military code, and forced a citizen to walk farther with his gear, the centurion would punish the soldier: he could be fined or flogged, or put on smaller rations, or forced to stand somewhere all day.

So Jesus says to people who knew what that spear tip felt like: Don't revolt. Don't pretend you are going along with this and then kill the soldier. Go an

extra mile as a subversive act. You're going to get in the soldier's head. The soldier is not expecting this, and wonders what you are up to. Is he mocking me? Is he insulting my strength? Is he trying to get me disciplined? What if word gets back to the centurion, and it looks like I made this citizen walk a second mile?

The soldier has never been in this position before. Everything is thrown out of order. And the oppressed person is now given some dignity, because he is making a choice to go another mile.

Now you don't do these things vindictively. This is why Jesus says, Love your enemies. But you are finding creative ways to act subversively against unfair power. Jesus says to poor people in his day, You don't have to wait for Rome to be overthrown. You can be leaven in the midst of the dough.

I am basing much of these thoughts on the writing of Walter Wink, (*from his book, The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium*). He says this: The rules are Caesar's, but how one responds to the rules is God's, and Caesar has no power over that."

Jesus is saying, When the system is unfair, you don't need to respond in the same way. When someone mistreats you, find a way to creatively respond in a way that points out the unfairness. When someone insults you, don't do tit for tat. Find a non-violent way to respond.

The Civil Rights movement is probably the best recent example in history. Martin Luther King, Jr. confronted racism and injustice for black Americans. But he was not going to advocate violence. He advocated instead "non-violent resistance." And his final goal was not only societal change, but transformation for the racists.

Listen to what he said before the Montgomery bus boycott: "Another thing that we had to get over was the fact that the nonviolent resister does not seek to humiliate or defeat the opponent but to win his friendship and understanding...The end of violence or the aftermath of violence is bitterness. The aftermath of nonviolence is reconciliation and the creation of a beloved community. A boycott is never an end within itself. It is merely a means to awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor but the end is reconciliation, the end is redemption." *The Power of Non-violence*, Martin Luther King, Jr., June 4, 1957

Jesus says, Do not resist an evildoer, but what he means is, don't use aggression and violence. Overcome evil with good! Don't get caught up in giving back what somebody is dishing out, because it will not change hearts. It will not create community.

There have been times I have felt attacked by somebody in an email, and I composed an email in response, and before I sent that email, I erased it, because I thought, This is not redemptive enough. This will not help our relationship. Jesus says, Overcome the evil with good!

Then Jesus says, "You have heard that it was, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Whom do we see as our enemies? Is there someone in my life I would call an enemy? What are the groups we consider enemies? The NRA? The ACLU? Unions? Management? The Left? The Right? Socialists? Capitalists? Conservatives? Liberals? Loving our enemies doesn't mean we can't debate people, it doesn't mean we can't fight against causes we think are wrong; it means we can't get away with *hatred* for the people who espouse those causes.

Why does Jesus say we can't hate our enemies? I wonder if it's because when we let ourselves hate somebody, it's easier to think of ourselves as totally right, and our enemy as totally wrong. Hatred sees the other person as the great problem! Jesus says: I want you to love your enemy, which means you'll need to find a way to treat him or her as a fellow human being whom God loves as well. And they might even have something to teach us!

How do we treat our enemy with love? First of all, he says, pray for them! It is hard to hate someone when we find ourselves praying for them. We can pray for the person's well-being, for their relationship with God, for their growth in grace, for their salvation. It may be as simple as, "Lord Jesus, have mercy on....." We pray for love to grow in *our* hearts. We worship a God who works miracles!

We love our enemies because they are made in God's image, just like we are. The sun shines on them, and the rain falls on them, just like it does on us. At the end of this passage, Jesus throws out a challenge: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." A better interpretation of the Greek word for perfect here (*teleios*) is *perfectly mature*, or *doing what it was intended to do*. Something that is *teleios* has come of age, it's finally

doing what it was created for. Jesus is saying: Be mature disciples! Grow up into the people God wants you to be!

Remember we can't do this in our own power. But I invite you this week to think of a difficult person you might reach out to, somebody you will at least start praying for, and invite the power of God's Spirit to help you begin. And the Spirit can help you think of a creative, assertive response to that person so that perhaps, the work of transformation and reconciliation can begin.
Amen.