

March 4, 2012
 First Baptist Vancouver

Text: Matthew 5:38-42

Title: "No Longer An Echo"

(Series: Following Jesus into His Sermon on the Mount)

Oh how I wish there were a way the whole world could hear Jesus preach this section of His Sermon on the Mount! I wish the whole world could hear Him preach His whole Sermon on the Mount! But especially this section, and the one to follow which flows from it. The world would change over-night. It is a fact of history: whenever and wherever this section has been given a serious hearing, we have witnessed the kingdom of heaven invading the earth in powerfully redemptive ways.

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you ..." In order for Jesus to get a hearing of this section of His Sermon, we who listen to Him have to resolve a crisis that has been building since the moment Jesus began to preach. At this point we have to finally decide whether or not we actually trust the Preacher on the Mount. We have to decide: does He know what He is talking about? 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 we think the Preacher on the Mount is **smart**. Do you think He is smart? I think that the majority of people who hear Jesus preach His Sermon think He is good. I think that the majority of people who hear Jesus preach His Sermon think He is compassionate. I think that the majority of people who hear Jesus preach His Sermon think He is insightful. But is He smart? Is the Preacher "street-smart"? Does He really understand what it takes to make it in our world? **"You have heard it was said, 'eye for eye, tooth for tooth,' but I say to you ..."**

Here Jesus is working with one of the oldest laws of civilization, the so-called "lex talionis," the "law of just retribution." It is found in the earliest known codes of law, in the so-called Code of Hammurabi, formulated around 2260 BC (between 2285 and 2242). And it is found in the Old Testament, in sections of Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy called the 'case laws' (or ordinances). So, for example, Exodus 21:22-25 "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 what the court allows. 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" (see also Leviticus 24:20, Deuteronomy 19:21).

Three facts to keep in mind about the OT use of "lex talionis." One, this stipulation was entrusted to the judge of Israel. That is, "lex talionis" was to be administered by the court and not by individuals. Prior to the giving of this law, injury to a member of the family could be avenged by any other member of the family. Any member of the offended-family could injure or kill a member of the offending-family. The "lex talionis" takes

revenge out of private hands and puts it into the public court of law. If revenge was to be taken, it could only be taken by the court. The law checks the tendency to take the law into our own hands; it checks the tendency to act against injustice unilaterally.

Two, this stipulation was given to limit revenge. And as such, says Bravard Childs, it ‘marked an important advance for humanity’ (Exodus, pg 472). “Lex talionis” limits the victim’s compensation to an exact equivalent and no more. Punishment must “fit the crime”; eye for eye, tooth for tooth. No more!

Three, this stipulation is properly called a ‘permission’. It is an accommodation to our fallen nature. It is as though God were 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 be civil, “foot for foot, not life for foot.” But, and this is critical to realize: from the beginning it has been God’s will that no human being seek revenge. That no-one retaliate. Leviticus 19 – ‘holiness code’ (19:2) – “be holy because I the Lord your God, am holy.” This is the rest of the Chapter, in line after line, God spells out what is meant by being holy. Until the climax in verse 18, “do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord”. “Lex talionis” was given as “permission” to those who could not find it in their hearts to resist revenge: at least be fair, eye for eye, tooth for tooth.

I think you can then understand what Jesus is doing with ‘lex talionis’ in His Sermon on the Mount. He is calling us to God’s prior, more perfect will. “Civilized humanity”, limiting revenge; then the Kingdom of heaven butts in, “Kingdom-ized” humanity rejects revenge altogether. “You have heard that it was said... but I tell you “Do not resist an evil person” (Matthew 5:39). “Do not resist”—what does Jesus mean? Just stand there and let evil run rampant?

Note that Jesus does not say “if someone slaps your brother on the right cheek, if someone forces your sister to go one mile, if someone takes advantage of your child. Jesus is not calling us to passively stand by while others are mistreated by evil persons. For Jesus also taught that we are to confront those who are doing wrong. Matthew 18:15 “if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private.” “Do not resist” does not mean “just stand by while others are treated wrongly.” As one New Testament scholar puts it, Jesus’ command to “love your neighbour as yourself” forbids one to stand by, immobile and tolerant while the life, dignity, or security of ones’ neighbour is transgressed” (Pinchos Lapide, *The Sermon on the Mount*, pg 132). Martin Luther made the point well: Jesus is saying “No one should ever resist evil’ for that would completely undermine all rule and authority. But this is what He is saying, “you, you shall not do it”.

Then I ask. Is Jesus saying that when we are injured by the evil person we are to just stand there and take it? Is that what He means by ‘do not resist’? Just ‘take it’? Was Dietrich Bonhoeffer correct when during the reign of Adolf Hitler, he wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship*, “the only way to overcome evil is to let it run itself to a stand still because it does not find the resistance it is looking for?” (*Cost of Discipleship*, pg 157). Was Bonhoeffer right when he went on to say “when evil meets no opposition and

encounters no obstacle but only patient endurance, its sting is drowned and at last it meets an opponent which is more than its match”? (Ibid, pg 158). Is Jesus calling us to passive non resistance? Was Bonhoffer 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? Before going any further, I think it important to note Jesus’ realistic appraisal of ‘the way things are’ in this world. Jesus labels the person who wants to injure us as ‘evil’ (5:39). “Do not resist the one who is evil”. Jesus is not wearing ‘rose coloured glasses; He is no Pollyanna. He is not naïve. He judges the nature and purpose of the person and the act as ‘evil’. Jesus is not out of touch with “the way things are” when He calls us to His different way of life. Indeed, and this is crucial to grasp, it is because He knows how evil evil is that Jesus speaks the way He does.

“You may 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? What are we to do with all that emotional energy generated in the encounter with evil? Jesus answers with four-illustrations drawn from everyday life. In His four examples He interprets what ‘do not resist’ means. And it is nothing short of brilliant. Let us first make sure we grasp the specific situations Jesus has in mind. And then let us go back and listen carefully to what He says in each case.

Illustration one (5:39) “if someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also”. As you likely know, Jesus is not here speaking of any old slap. Only left handed persons can hit the right cheek of someone facing them. Jesus is therefore speaking about the slap with the back of the hand, a gesture of contempt. Jesus is speaking of a ‘deliberate insult forcing pain and humiliation” (Lapide pg 121).

Illustration two (5:40) “if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.” Jesus is not here speaking about any old attempt to take ones possessions. He is talking about a mis-carriage of justice. Two major garments were worn in Palestine in Jesus’ day: the tunic, a long under shirt with sleeves worn next to the body; and the cloak, a loose –fitting coat that went over the shirt. The cloak also served as a blanket at night. For many people these were the only two articles of clothing they had. To sue for a man’s tunic, for his under shirt, was a terrible mis-carriage of justice; one, which according to the Old Testament, brings the sue-er into direct conflict with Yahweh.

Illustration Three. Matthew 5:41. “If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.” Jesus is not here speaking about any old forced walk. The word translated “forces” is a military word. Jesus is referring to the Roman Soldier’s ‘right’ to commandeer any Jew into carrying his baggage for one mile (see for example Simon of Cyrene is pressed with ‘service to carry Jesus’ cross). It was a degrading act of colonial exploitation.

Illustration four, “give to the one who asks you and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you”, Matthew 5:41. Now after the illustrations about being slapped, unjustly sued and commandeered by soldiers, this one feels rather anti-climactic. But is it? As Dale Bruner notes, ‘by using this illustration last, Matthew’s Jesus teaches

us again that the usual tests of discipleship occur in daily unheroic situations (pg 211). Since Jesus is addressing the evil person He is not in this fourth illustration speaking about any old request. He is dealing with the request which takes advantage of another person. Now, what does the bringing of the Kingdom, the One who has all authority in heaven and earth, call us to do in each of these real life situations? If this should happen how are the Kingdom-ized to respond? How are Kingdom-of-God people to act? Clearly, we are not to try to get even. But is that the end of it? Are we to passively stand by and let evil persons have their way? No! And now we have come to the heart of the matter. Passively stand by? No! For there is nothing passive in any of Jesus' four illustrations. This is crucial; there is nothing passive in any of the cases Jesus cites. 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 the encounter." What?

Go back through each of the four illustrations and listen very carefully to Jesus' words. Let's do so in reverse order. Illustration four. Does Jesus say, as one modern paraphrases has it, "when someone asks you for something, give it to him; when someone wants to borrow something lend it to him?" No! There is no 'it' in the text. As St Augustine pointed out, Jesus does not say, 'give whatever you are asked' but give to whomever asks." Big difference! To give 'whatever' someone asks is being passive ... and could be wrong. Do you give a child whatever she asks for? Do you give money to a beggar who is going to spend it on drugs? The focus is not on what is asked ... but on who is asking. Jesus says, "give to the one who asks; do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow." The issue is relationship with persons not requests. Go beyond the person's surface request. Discuss the real need of the person. It is not a call to passivity, but to be actively caring. Engage the person.

Illustration three: 5:41. 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 further.' That is being passive. Jesus says, 'go with him two miles.' Go! That is another matter altogether. Before the soldier can exploit you, turn the tables; offer to take the oppressor's baggage another mile! You see, when he forces you to carry his pack you are his slave. Ah! But if you volunteer to carry his pack you are not his slave; you are in charge. You are now setting the agenda! After the first mile the soldier takes the load off your back and starts to put it on his back to continue the march. You, however, grab the pack and offer to carry it further. He says to you, "he, I did not order you to go two miles." And you say, "I am not under your orders." The whole situation changes!

Illustrations Two: does Jesus say, 'If someone wants to sue you and take your tunic (your shirt) let him sue you for your coat also?' No! Jesus does not say 'let him sue.' That is being passive. Jesus says "let him have your coat also! That is another matter. Before he can sue you for more give him more! Beat him to the punch! Cray? No. It means you have wrested the offensive from the evil person. It means you have stolen his thunder. You have shifted ground and engaged the opponent in a new game for which he or she is not prepared.

Illustration one. Does Jesus say, as a modern paraphrase, “If someone slaps you on the right cheek let him slap you on the other also”? No! Jesus does not say ‘let him.’ That is being passive. Jesus says “turn to him the other cheek.” That is another matter altogether. Listen even more carefully. Jesus does not say ‘turn the other cheek’. That is passive acquaintance. Jesus says ‘turn to him the other cheek”. This is active engagement. It means you have wrestled the offensive from the evil person. It means you have taken charge of the situation. Yes, it may mean further pain and humiliation. But you have changed the dynamics. You are the one in charge of your life.

Jesus does not call us to passively surrender to evil but to take the initiative to actually overcome evil with good. As Myra Augsburg put it, Jesus is calling us to the freedom of ‘not having one behaviour determined by the way we are treated,” (Pg 98). E. Stanley Jones, 20th Century Christian Leader whom Indian Christians called ‘the greatest missionary since St Paul, understood Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount better than anyone I know. In his book, “The Christ of the Mount,” (1931) he asks: what should be done in each of the cases Jesus cites where a wrong has been done? Jones answered: “The temptation 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, the blow begets blow, hate begets hate, and you will find yourself in a vicious cycle. Get out of it by resisting to a higher level and by using higher weapons (172). “You choose your own battleground, and your own weapons, you refuse the opponent his, and compel him to stand on ground with which he is not familiar and to face weapons he does not know how to face” (173).

Jones goes on, “allowing a man to smite you on one cheek, and letting him have the shirt, and submitting to him when he compels you to go one mile does little to no good. The fact is that it does harm to the man who does it and to the man who submits to it. It is the other cheek, the cloak also, and the second mile that does the trick. It is this plus that that turns the scale. The one cheek, the shirt, and the one mile – this is passive resistance; but turning the other cheek, giving the cloak and going the second mile – this is active resistance on the plane of unquenchable good will. Passive resistance may reveal nothing but weakness: the active resistance of love reveals nothing but strength” (page 173).

When we read the rest of the Gospel stories, we realize that Jesus is only calling us to do as he Himself does. The Preacher only calls us to do as He did in the face of evil. Local police spat on Him, they blindfolded Him and hit Him in the face. The foreign military personnel then repeated the insults and injuries. They thrust a crown of thorns into His skull, put a royal purple robe on Him and mocked Him, then they too spat on Him and hit Him again and again and again. But He refused to re-taliate. He refused to respond in ????. He took the offensive ... the offensive of goodwill ... culminating in the prayer: “Forgive them father for they know not what they do.” Roman soldiers knew power when they saw it; one of the soldiers stationed at the cross, was overcome with awe at the way Jesus met evil with good, falling to his feet, saying “This is certainly the Son of God” (Mark 15:39)

I want to quote E. Stanley Jones again: This time from his book on Mahatma Ghandi “Ghandi: A Portrait of a Friend (1948). Jones had a close relationship with Ghandi.

They often visited and talked about Jesus and His radical way. Ghandi heard what Jesus is saying, and called people to act on the higher level. So Jones writes: We have had demonstrations 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. The lower level is where we return evil for good – the demonic level. The next level is where we return good for good and 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 those levels? Return evil for good, and you become evil, and then nothing in the universe backs you. The sum total of reality is against you. You quickly or slowly perish, but perish you will. Return good for good, and evil for evil, and then you become an eye-for-an-eye and a tooth for-a-tooth person. The other man’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-action nation inevitably pulls down the higher acting nation to its own level. There is war. Return good for evil and it leads to your enabling and to the possible redemption of the wrongdoer. In case he is not redeemed, nevertheless you are stronger” (157)

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 we are merely an echo. When the Preacher on the Mount grabs hold of our souls, we are no longer an echo of other people’s or nations’ behavior. The in-breaking kingdom of God, the coming of the Spirit of God, lifts a person or nation to a higher level. Jones then evaluates the three levels of life: “The first level is pure weakness. The second level is pseudo-power and pure weakness. The third level is pure power. Any individual, group, or nation that adopts it will be invincible” (158). I conclude with the words of 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 to see the inversion from the present viewpoint? We must, simply, accept that he is the best and smartest man who ever lived in the world, and he is even now, ‘the prince of the kings of the earth’ (Rev. 1:5). Then we heartily join His cosmic conspiracy to overcome evil with good” [The Divine Conspiracy, 90].

Come now. Let us gather at the Table 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 redeeming way.