

The Sermon on the Mount

Matt 5:21-48: The antitheses, part 4

Jesus concludes the Antitheses with “be perfect.” “...‘perfect’ as a translation of *teleios* too easily suggests the notion of sinlessness. Jesus, however, probably had in view ‘completeness’ or ‘maturity,’ especially given the meaning of the probably underlying Aramaic.”¹

1. **The scope of the passage:** Jesus gives four examples in 5:39-42 of his command, “do not resist an evil person.” Previously we discussed turning the other cheek, in which Jesus tells his disciples not to pursue revenge or defend honor when struck by the backhanded blow used on one’s inferiors (this example being primarily about defending honor, not fist fights).

Second, he instructs them that “rather than trying to get one’s inner garment back by legal recourse, one should relinquish the outer one too” (Keener, *Matthew*, 198). More than one commentator points out that (a) this could lead to nudity, since many peasants had only one outer cloak; and (b) the law expressly forbade anyone from taking another’s outer cloak even as a pledge overnight, since it “doubled as a poor man’s bedding.” “Jesus provides a shockingly graphic, almost humorous, illustration of what he means by nonresistance to force his hearers to consider their values. They value honor and *things* more than they value the kingdom.”

Third, Jesus tells them to go the extra mile. Roman soldiers were legally permitted to requisition what they needed from local inhabitants, even to the point of requiring forced labor. “Yet ‘going the extra mile’ is not only a case of submitting to unjust demands but also of exceeding them—showing love to one’s oppressor, although one’s associates may wrongly view this love as collaboration with the enemy occupation. It is bending over backward to show that one loves and takes no offense.”

The fourth example is not explicitly one of retaliation: Disciples are to give to those who ask for handouts or loans. As Augustine notes, Jesus says to “give to everyone that asks,” not “give everything to him that asks” (*The Sermon on the Mount*, 67).

These examples are followed by a more general command to love one’s enemies in vv. 43-47, on the grounds that God, in his common grace, shows love to righteous and unrighteous alike.

- a. Carson believes Jesus’ preaching here reflects “a Semitic and poetic cast of mind,” an “antithetical and categorical form of statement,”² much the same as he used when he told his followers to hate their fathers and mothers (Lk 14:26), elsewhere telling them to honor their parents (cf. Mt 7:10+). Is Jesus exaggerating or employing hyperbole in this passage?
- b. What contextual cues indicate the type relationships addressed in 5:38-48? To which of the following is this passage applicable: personal relationships; relationships with private organizations; relationships with churches; relationships with governments; relationships among nations; response to a mugging; response when observing someone else being attacked?
- c. As noted, the first three examples involve retaliation: being insulted, being sued, and being oppressed. How often are you are placed in a position to retaliate? What are some examples? How do/did you respond?

¹ Craig Blomberg, “The Most Often Abused Verses in the Sermon on the Mount,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 46 (2004), 1.

² D. A. Carson, *Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World*, Baker (2004), 43.

- d. Jesus is presenting the spirit of the “*lex talionis*” (retaliation) laws. In our last meeting we decided the primary goal of these instructions is in part to break the cycle of retaliation. Do Jesus’ injunctions apply when it’s clear the others’ heart can’t or won’t be changed? Are the actions commanded here by Jesus no longer applicable if there *is* no cycle of violence at work?
2. **Pacifism and the state:** In Romans 13:1-7, Paul expands on the final verses of Rom 12, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” As an application, Paul instructs Christians to obey the civil authorities, which (like the institution of marriage) were given by God for the good of people.

Yoder, in *The Politics of Jesus* (ch. 10), points out that this is not the only passage in the NT referring to the civil authorities. The Devil, tempting Jesus, offers him the governments of the world; Rev 13 and 1 Peter depict a government which oppresses Christians. The NT recognizes the existence of ungodly rulers and place boundaries on Christian obedience; as Peter says in Acts 5:29, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

In this light, Rom 13:1-7 is not demanding unconditional obedience to governmental authorities, but is setting obedience as the norm, even during persecution. The same message is found in 1 Peter 2:13+: “For the Lord’s sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God’s will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish.”

As Christians, are we permitted to retaliate on behalf of the state—e.g. as a member of the military or the police? Is it even consistent with Jesus’ teaching for us not to retaliate personally, but to enjoin the civil authorities to do so, on one’s behalf?

3. **Non-resistance:** In 5:39, “Do not resist and evildoer”³ uses the verb *anthistemi*, meaning “to be in opposition to, set oneself against, oppose” (BDAG). This is the same verb used to describe the sorcerer who opposed the Paul and Barnabas in Paphos in Acts 13:8; Paul’s opposition to Peter in Gal 2:11; resistance of the Devil in James 4:7 and 1 Peter 5:9. According to Richard Gardner,

The words translated *resist*... mean to *set oneself against* something or someone... Here the more precise meaning is supplied by the context: Do not retaliate against those who injure or harm you. Do not act as the adversary who must settle the score. Do not insist on your rights as an offended party.⁴

Carson argues that Jesus is not telling his disciples they shouldn’t resist an evil person attacking a third party; Jesus is telling us not to resist when we are under attack. So Carson gives the example of intervening between a violent drunk and the victim of his anger, and doesn’t believe this was a violation of Jesus’ teaching.

Did Jesus resist the Pharisees (see e.g. John 8:40-44; also Matt 23)? Did Paul resist the civil authorities after being unjustly imprisoned in Philippi for casting the demon from the fortune-telling slave girl (Acts 16:37; see also Acts 22:25; 25:8-12)? Where in the lives of Jesus and the apostles can you draw the line indicating when it’s preferable to offer no resistance to evil doers?

4. **Nonviolence:** Leo Tolstoy wrote about this passage,

People once lived an animal life and violated or killed whom they thought well to violate or kill... Thousands of years ago, as far back as the times of Moses, a day came when people had

³ Some translations, including the KJV, incorrectly translated this as “do not resist evil,” leading to years of confusion.

⁴ *Matthew* (1991), p. 109. The lexicon of J. P. Louw and E. A. Nida (eds.; 1998, vol. I, p. 495) gives three meanings: “to resist by actively opposing pressure or power; to fight back against; to oppose in return.”

realized that to violate or kill one another is bad... And violence and slaughter, though not so frequent or so cruel as before, continued, only with this difference, that those who committed or commended such acts excused themselves by pleading that they did it for the benefit of humanity.

It was just this sophisticated justification of violence that Christ denounced. When two enemies fight, each may think his own conduct justified by the circumstances. Excuses can be made for every use of violence, and no infallible standard has ever been discovered by which to measure the worth of these excuses. Therefore Christ taught us to disbelieve in any excuse for violence and (contrary to what had been taught by them of old times) never to use violence.⁵

Calvin also sees Jesus as forbidding violence:

Though Christ does not permit his people to repel violence by violence, yet he does not forbid them to endeavor to avoid an unjust attack... The amount of the whole admonition is, that believers should learn to forget the wrongs that have been done them—that they should not, when injured, break out into hatred or ill-will, or wish to commit an injury on their part—but that, the more the obstinacy and rage of wicked men was excited and inflamed, they should be the more fully disposed to exercise patience.

Tolstoy profoundly influenced Gandhi, who in turn influenced Martin Luther King. These and others believe Jesus was repudiating *violence*, which has led to the development of programs of nonviolent resistance. On this, George Mavrodes writes,

Do not resist one who is evil... Some people like to make a distinction between violence and nonviolence, or between violence and force, or between active and passive resistance, and so on. I myself think that there is not much more juice in these distinctions... Isn't it clear, however, that Jesus is not appealing to any such distinction? He seems to have no use for them whatever. There is no suggestion at all that he wants to rule out *some* sorts of resistance... Think of it this way. If you wanted to give an example to get across the idea of *total* nonresistance, could you think of a better example than this one of Jesus?⁶

- a. Is this passage about violence? Does it require nonviolence of the disciple?
 - b. Was Rosa Parks following the model given in this passage? Why or why not?
 - c. Keener points out, "In first-century Palestine, few 'safe' vehicles existed for nonviolent social protests against the Romans; the Romans viewed most public protest as linked with revolution, and punished it accordingly" (ibid., 201). Let's assume the central elements of this passage are: (i) a personal relationship; (ii) not retaliating within that relationship; (iii) seeking the good of the other, even at personal cost. Is there a form of non-violent resistance which includes these, but reflects the greater options available in a modern democracy which weren't available to first-century citizens of Rome?
5. Whether commended by this passage or not, nonviolent resistance has an impressive list of achievements:

Wink calls attention to the surprising amounts of injustice that were done away with by the largely non-violent revolutions of Gandhi's India, Martin Luther King's civil rights movement, Cory Aquino's Philippines, and East German's Christian protests and prayer meetings before the Berlin Wall fell. (Blomberg, ibid.)

⁵ Quoted in John Howard Yoder, *What Would You Do?* (Herald, 1983), p. 48-49.

⁶ *Reformed Journal*, 36 (1986), 12.

How could we use it creatively to address poverty, beyond voting intelligently and writing letters to members of Congress? (Does this just take us back to Ron Sider's guidelines for living so as to help the poor, in *Rich Christians*, page 191-194?)

6. Having studied Matt 5, with which historical interpreter do you find yourself most closely aligned?
 - a. *Martin Luther*: the SOTM sets the bar high to drive us toward grace; it applies to the ecclesiastical, not the secular sphere (*Stott* expresses these ideas as well)
 - b. *Anabaptist, Mennonites, Tolstoy, Bonhoeffer*: Stop wrangling about this passage and take Jesus at his word. Don't strike back, don't resist the evil doer, and don't participate in organizations which do, and watch hearts be changed for Christ!
 - c. *Thomas Aquinas*: The strict requirements of the Sermon are a higher calling not meant for all the saved (...mostly just the cloistered clergy)
 - d. *Augustine, John Chrysostom*: To the old, imperfect law Christ adds this new, more perfect word
 - e. *John Calvin*: The Mennonites are naïve and Aquinas was either ignorant or malicious. Nor is Jesus adding anything new to the law
 - f. *Reinhold Niebuhr*: The Sermon presents interpersonal ethics; governments are called to justice, not selflessness
 - g. *D. A. Carson, John Stott, Craig Blomberg*: The Sermon's high demands mirror the already/not-yet tension of the kingdom... oh, and the Mennonites, though sincere, had poor exegesis
7. As Paul says in Romans 12, one reason we don't seek revenge is that it belongs to God. On this, Stott says,

[The *lex talionis*] is the basis for capital punishment... There are many humanists today who say they are opposed to capital punishment because they think it cheapens human life. Now whatever stance the Christian takes on this issue, let him be quite clear, that in requiring capital punishment the law does it not because of the cheapness of human life, but for the exact opposite, because of the sanctity of human life... My own position on that controversial issue is that I believe the state should retain its right of capital punishment as a witness to the gravity of murder as a crime and to the fact that this is what the murderer deserves. Now I believe having said that that the state should hedge this around with every conceivable safeguard... and maybe never use it, but I would want the state to retain the right as a witness to the sanctity of human life and the gravity of homicide or murder.

Discuss.



Fun quote: Luther was a realist, believing that military and police forces were a necessary evil: "If anyone attempted to... abolish all temporal law and sword... he would be loosing the ropes and chains of the savage wild beasts and letting them bite and mangle everyone, meanwhile insisting that they were harmless, tame and gentle creatures; but I would have the proofs in my wounds." ["On Temporal Authority; To What Extent Should it be Obeyed," in *Luther: Selected Political Writings*, ed. J. M. Porter (1974) 56.]