

“The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly”
Matthew 5:38-48; Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

I love the movie, “The Godfather.” That’s understandable because the American Film Institute ranks it second behind only “Citizen Kane” in its list of the 100 greatest American movies. I was living in New York City when “The Godfather” was being filmed in the summer of 1971. I recall the big headlines and photographs in the New York Post when a photographer obtained secret pictures of the filming of the scene where Vito Corleone, played by Marlon Brando, is shot. And later when I lived on Staten Island, I would drive visitors out to see the house and church used in the movie there on the island. But “The Godfather” is more than just a movie; it is a part of American culture.

I once heard a comedian say that most American men actually communicate with one another through quotes from the movie. For instance:

“I’m going to make him an offer he can’t refuse.”

“It’s not personal, it’s strictly business.”

“Leave the gun. Take the cannoli.”

Men my age believe most of life’s questions can be answered with a quote from “The Godfather.”

Yet, what most people don’t realize is that the movie is also an illustration of our scripture passage. The driving force of “The Godfather” is revenge. The famous last scene has the henchmen of Michael Corleone, played by Al Pacino, murder all his rivals who are also the people who had killed his brother, Sonny. This takes place while Michael stands as godfather to his sister’s baby.

And this theme is carried further in the subsequent Godfather sequels when we learn that the father escaped Sicily in order to avoid the blood feud in which his family participated, and for which the scriptural mandate “an eye for an eye” was written. Plus, we see how a life based upon revenge and retaliation leads to family dysfunction, spiritual death, and just plain old unhappiness.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right check, turn the other also;...”

There may be no scripture passage better known, or more commonly quoted than our verses this morning. There also may be no scripture more misunderstood. These verses deal with personal, adversarial relationships. In these, Jesus speaks specifically to our everyday lives.

Now, to understand what they are saying to us, we must begin with their historical context, for most of the time when quoted, they are used inappropriately, sometimes signifying the exact opposite of their intent. The most referenced verse is likely “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” Jesus is quoting Exodus 21:24. But rather than condoning revenge, it limits it.

In the Ancient Near East, blood feuds were a common way to settle scores. If you kill my father, I kill you. Then your brother kills me. My brother then kills

your brother. Your brother's son then murders my son. My nephew then murders your son's brother, etc., etc., etc. Blood feuds went on for generations until they wiped out entire families.

The Jewish law, "an eye for an eye," was an enormous societal and humanitarian step forward. It simply said, "an eye for an eye. If I kill you, then your brother can kill me, and then it is done." It also limited the revenge. If in a fight, I knock out your tooth, then in retaliation you are limited to knocking out my tooth. You cannot kill me for knocking out your tooth.

It is difficult for us to understand what a revolutionary concept this was in ancient culture. Today, when we say "an eye for an eye" we want to condone revenge. But its intent was the very opposite.

Now, let's look at some of the other elements of the passage. "...if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also..."

The original Greek word translated as striking someone refers to slapping the face with the back of the hand. That is why it specifically says "strike you on the *right* cheek." It was a back handed blow. Hitting someone in this way was a great insult, but not an act of violence. So, unlike how it is often portrayed in song or movies, the verse is not saying that if someone knocks you to the ground with their fist, you get up and let them punch you again. It means you let them insult you again. In first century Israel, a back handed slap was considered such a provocative insult that you could take the perpetrator to court and seek compensation.

"...and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well..."

Coat and cloak mean the same thing to us, but in the first century they differentiated two distinct garments. Coat signifies an inner garment. A better translation for us would be "shirt," since it was a long underwear garment with sleeves. The cloak was worn over it. A more expensive piece of clothing, it served as protection against the sun, cold, and rain, and doubled as a person's blanket at night.

You could sue a man for his coat, his shirt. You could literally take the shirt off his back. But you could not sue for his cloak, it was too important to a person's survival. Yet, Jesus says if a man wants your shirt, give him your cloak as well.

"...and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile..."

In the Roman world, a Roman soldier had the legal right to demand that a citizen carry his baggage, his equipment, for one mile. You could not refuse, it was the law. What makes the verse so interesting is that it carries more than a demand of kindness.

The Roman army occupied Palestine. Unlike some countries, the Jews did not cultivate an easy alliance with the Romans. Jews saw the Romans as heathens and oppressors, trespassers on God's Promised Land. By the time Matthew writes his gospel, the Romans have put down a bloody Jewish revolt, going so far as to

burn Jerusalem's Jewish Temple. So, when Jesus tells someone to go the second mile with a Roman soldier, many would have viewed this as unpatriotic, and even collaborating with the enemy.

After giving a woman a full medical examination, the doctor explained his prescription as he wrote it out. "Take the green pill with a glass of water when you get up. Take the blue pill with a glass of water after lunch. Then, just before bed, take the red pill with another glass of water."

"Exactly what is the problem, Doctor?" the woman asked.

He replied, "You're not drinking enough water."

It is easy in this passage to get bogged down concentrating on those described who are trying to harm us. But Jesus wants us to see the point of his words is us, how we react, and how that reaction affects our lives.

So, how are we to interpret these verses?

After the cheek, cloak, and extra mile ones, Jesus says, "Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you." Does that mean every time we see someone begging on the street, we should give them something? And all of us have at least one relative who would take every cent we have if we would give it to him. Plus, with many people, including our children, it is more important that we limit what we give them so as to make them self sufficient, help them understand the necessity of hard work, money management, and savings. Often, we veer back and forth between intense feelings of guilt and anger at the slothful and ungrateful reactions of those we help. So, what is Jesus telling us?

We are to respond to others as God responds to us. Essentially that means we are to be a whole lot more generous with our time, money, and talents than we really want to be. In the next section of the passage, Jesus tells us we are not only to love our neighbor, but our enemies. Just as God sends rain to both the good and bad, we are to love everyone — the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Now, sometimes we think of Jesus as some naïve do-gooder. We filter this scripture passage by saying, "If Jesus really understood what people were like, he wouldn't say this." Or, "this doesn't work." But remember, they tortured and crucified Jesus. I think he had a pretty good handle on the ugly side of human nature. Rather, Jesus is demanding that we replace the law of revenge with the commandment of love.

Greg Carey, professor of New Testament at Lancaster Theological Seminary in the book, Feasting On the Word, told about stumbling into the kitchen after a long day at work. As he put down his groceries and pressed the voice-mail button, his 10 year old daughter, Erin, began to speak.

"Dad, I'm the scripture reader at church this Sunday and I have that passage where Jesus says, 'Turn the other cheek.' You know that passage, right? Do the other Gospels have that same passage? Is it different in the other Gospels? Could you let me know, because...no offense, Dad, but I think Jesus is wrong."

This scripture passage makes most of us want to believe Jesus is wrong.

But what exactly is the commandment of love? “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...”

In the New Testament, love is not emotion, but action. Jesus is not telling us how to feel about people, but how to respond to them. When I tell someone outside my immediate family that I love them, it means I will do anything in my power to help them. It doesn't mean I always agree with the things they do or say. It doesn't mean I have heart warming feelings about them. It means I view them as a child of God, made in the image of God, and I respond to them from that perspective.

Turning the other cheek won't create a warm, fuzzy feeling in your heart. But it will keep you from escalating the violence, the anger, the dysfunction. It makes a statement about who you are, and how you view the other person.

And this is why in Jesus' command, “Love your neighbor,” the hard word for us is not love, but neighbor. In the Old Testament, neighbor meant your fellow Jews. Here, it signifies everyone, even people you don't like and who don't like you. Jesus says, Look, even bad people love the people who love them. You have to love, want the best, for those you don't particularly like.

Why? Because this is how God acts. And Jesus gives an example, noting that even God sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. So, Jesus calls us to love, help, aid, respond fairly to everyone — the good, the bad, and the ugly. Because that is exactly how God treats both them and you and me.

A man died and went to heaven. St. Peter meets him at the Pearly Gates and says, “Here's how it works. You need 100 points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you've done, and I give you a certain number of points for each item, depending on how good it was. When you reach 100 points, you get in.”

“Okay,” the man says, “I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her, even in my heart.”

“That's wonderful,” says St. Peter, “that's worth two points!”

“Two points?!?” he says.

“Well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my tithe and service.”

“Terrific!” says St. Peter... “That's certainly worth a point.”

“One point!?!?”

“I started a soup kitchen in my city and worked in a shelter for homeless veterans.”

“Fantastic, that's good for two more points,” he says.

“Two points!?!?”

Exasperated, the man cries. “At this rate the only way I'll get into heaven is by the grace of God.”

“Bingo! 100 points! Come on in!”

Each and every one of us, those we like, those we don't like, those who don't like us, all get into heaven the same way, the grace of God. Therefore, we treat each person just like God treats us.

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Jesus tells us to love, do our best for everyone — the good, the bad, and the ugly. Or, when thinking of turning the other cheek, giving our cloak, and walking the extra mile, I guess we do our best for the slapper, the suer, and the soldier.

These verses are hard because we like firm parameters. It would be more helpful if Jesus had drawn hard lines in the sand and said you only have to go this far and then you can turn your back on that person.

But Jesus casts the net of love far and wide. It does not mean we must always give people what they want. But we must always treat them with the respect due God's creation, and seek to have their best interests at heart.

A good question to always ask ourselves is: In the midst of my disobedience, greed, and inattentiveness to Jesus, how does God treat me? And when we answer: With love, grace, and generosity, then we immediately know how God expects us to react to others.

This morning, when confronted with difficult people do you and I respond with revenge or love?

Like God, are you ready to give some of your rain not only to the good, but also the bad and the ugly?

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