

DID JESUS REALLY SAY THAT?

Violence and Revenge Are Not Options

Matthew 5:38-48

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I want to begin this morning with a quote from one of the Desert Fathers, Abba Anthony. "A time is coming when men will go mad [insane], and when they see someone who is not mad, they will attack him saying, 'You are mad, you are not like us.'" As we've encountered this sermon series, "Did Jesus Really Say That?," we've talked about what it means that Jesus turns culture upside down, but it's really right side up! The world is crazy, and if we aren't crazy, they call us crazy. We are out of step.

And there is nowhere that the Gospel is more out of step with culture than in the matter of violence and revenge. Think about how we are awash in the teaching of getting even. From the time we are small, we watch TV and read books that focus on getting the bad guys, and giving them what they deserve. And we're disappointed when the bad guy goes free.

Think about how radical this teaching of Jesus was in his own time. Zealots were fomenting others and pushing for armed rebellion against Rome. Within Jesus' own band of disciples, he had a zealot, AND he had people who collected taxes for the occupying forces! Can you imagine the discussion they had when they heard this teaching of Jesus?

The eye-for-eye law (v. 38) was intended by Jewish law to limit retribution. But Jesus comes along and offers a creative comeback. Turn the other cheek. Regarding someone taking your shirt (v. 40), give them your coat, too. The poorest of the land only owned two things, a shirt and a coat. Literally, Jesus says, give them the shirt off your back. Perhaps your nakedness (a strong taboo in Jewish culture) will shock your oppressor and expose his hatred. If a Roman soldier forces you to carry his load one mile, offer to go a second one (v. 41). In other words, use our imagination, find creative responses to evil. This will drain the oppressor of power. Seize the initiative, Jesus says, and take away the oppressor's power to humiliate you.

There is a saying: The best way to get rid of enemy is to make that enemy your friend. Look at v. 43ff. Have you ever prayed--I mean really prayed--for an enemy? When we do, we begin to see that one as God does, to love that one as God does. (Wait a minute...maybe that's why we don't pray! We don't want to give up our hatred and grudge!). Someone asked Nelson Mandela about hating his captors. When he was walking out of prison for the last time, they asked, didn't he feel hatred rise up within him? "Yes, for a moment," he replied, "Then I thought, 'They've had me for 27 years. If I keep hating them, they will still have me.' I wanted to be free."

And notice the evangelistic witness of all this. Jesus says our witness of love, forgiveness and letting go of hatred must exceed that of the world's (vv. 46-47). Do you remember back in 2006,

when a man name Charles Carl Roberts IV shot and killed several Amish girls and then himself? Amish families sent sympathy and forgiveness messages to his family. There were only 75 at his funeral, and half were Amish. They helped set up his memorial fund to aid his family.

Jesus closes this thought by saying we are to be "perfect" as the Father is (v. 48). Did Jesus really say that? Yes, but "perfect" does not mean without sin or morally pure. It means to be whole, complete, mature, fully developed. We are never mature or whole until we learn to forgive and let go of revenge. We have to figure out whether we're going to live by a set of scales....or by the Cross. It was at the Cross that evil looked as if it would win. But love conquered hate, and Jesus is the Conqueror.

I don't care if I live to be 150. I will never grow tired of telling about God's love. Deep love. Broad love. God loves everyone. His love is all-inclusive, all-embracing. Everyone is included in God's circle of forgiveness. He causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust. Why? Because we're all unjust. He loves us all. We welcome every person whom God loves. And we forgive all whom God forgives.

Many of us know the name of Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Church in the Chicago area. Not as many of us know of his wife, Lynne, a tireless worker for peace and reconciliation in the world. A few months back, she wrote a piece about places of conflict in our world and about how impractical the words of Jesus seem in the face of such horrors. She closed by saying this: "...I am devoting myself to peacemaking. Wherever I go in the world, I want to be quick to listen to differing perspectives and slow to pick sides. I want to...avoid simplistic answers. I want to raise funds for refugees and other victims of violence and protest...the escalating costs of war. If I were a pragmatist, I might not bother to do this. But I am a follower of Jesus." [*Sojourners*, Feb, 2013, p. 25].

And so here we are. Choosing against violence, grudges and hatred is not always practical and easy, neat and tidy. But we're followers of Jesus!