

## Overcoming Evil with Good

Matt. 5: 38-48

“Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that. The beauty of nonviolence is that in its own way and in its own time it seeks to break the chain reaction of evil” (Dr. M.L.King Jr., *Where do we go from here: Chaos or Community?*).

Dr. King’s notion of nonviolence had six key principles. First, one can resist evil without resorting to violence. Second, nonviolence seeks to win the “friendship and understanding” of the opponent, not to humiliate him (King, *Stride toward Freedom*, 84).

Third, evil itself, not the people committing evil acts, should be opposed. Fourth, those committed to nonviolence must be willing to suffer without retaliation as suffering itself can be redemptive.

Fifth, nonviolent resistance avoids “external physical violence” and “internal violence of spirit” as well: “The nonviolent resister not only refuses to shoot his opponent but he also refuses to hate him” (King, *Stride*, 85).

The resister should be motivated by love in the sense of the Greek word *agape*, which means “understanding,” or “redeeming good will for all men” (King, *Stride*, 86). The sixth principle is that the nonviolent resister must have a “deep faith in the future,” stemming from the conviction that “The universe is on the side of justice” (King, *Stride*, 88).

<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/nonviolence>

The reason the civil rights movement was such a success is because it followed God’s plan for resisting evil as described by Jesus in this passage.

Each time Jesus refers to what was said to those of old, He is pointing out the abuses. When their religious leaders quoted an old testament teaching they often expanded it in a wrong direction to suit themselves. That was the case here. It was originally given to counter the “street justice” of personal revenge.

The concept was to be used in the context of a national and local justice system, not individual retaliation. The judge was to restore equilibrium and nothing more. It was not to be “a life for an eye” or “a life for a tooth.” This law of retaliation was to make sure the punishment fit the crime.

But Jesus went a step further. He described the possibility of non-resistance toward evil, and even going above and beyond non-resistance towards turning the other cheek and going the extra mile.

Why would Jesus advocate such a response to evil actions? First, Jesus never spoke on His own authority (John 12: 49). They were always the Father’s words, so this is God’s instruction on how we are to respond to evil actions. Second, this is referring to evil actions, not evil as in spiritual darkness. We are to oppose darkness. In fact, James says to resist the devil, and he will flee from you (James 4:7).

The reason Jesus taught this is twofold. First, non-resistance shines the spotlight on evil. Evil likes cover and it likes company. But when it is opposed with good, it is exposed and alienated. Jesus said the world has no more covering for its sin now that He has come into the world and confronted it (John 15: 22). Second, non-resistance keeps evil out of our own souls by seeking vengeance, which keeps the devil from infiltrating us and gaining an advantage over us.

When we resist evil with good, we allow the Holy Spirit to convict the evildoer of sin (John 16: 8). This concept is described in Proverbs 25: 22: “If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for you will heap coals of fire on his head, and the Lord will reward you.”

The Apostle Paul brings this into a New Testament context as well:

“Beloved, do not give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord. Therefore, ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty,

give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Rom. 12: 19-21)

This spiritual principle is applied in five (5) ways in this passage.

### 1. Turning the other cheek (v. 39)

Why does Jesus specifically mention being struck on the right cheek? Because most people were (and still are) right handed. When someone was "back slapped" this was considered a greater insult than just being struck directly by a fist or a rod. When a right handed person back slaps someone, it results in that person being struck on the right cheek. The idea is to not respond to insults in kind.

### 2. Settle disputes (v. 40)

Jesus shows us it is better to settle disputes than to insist on rights. This is shown in the context of litigation but it has broader application. The "coat" is the close fitting tunic worn next to the body, similar to a long T-shirt. The "cloak" is the outer mantle, the more expensive of the two. The idea is to be willing to surrender more than what is demanded, to expose greed and vengeance with generosity and love.

### 3. Go the extra mile (v. 41)

The Persians had a postal system which ordered men upon request to carry letters voluntarily during long stretches for a certain leg of the journey. This was later adopted by the Roman government, to force Jewish citizens to carry the military baggage of Roman soldiers on demand, for one mile (1,000 paces, which is 142 yards shorter than our mile). We see this at the crucifixion of Jesus when Simon of Cyrene was ordered to carry Jesus' cross (Matt. 27: 32).

The same idea applies here. When we are willing to go above and beyond the requirement, it exposes injustice and oppression, keeps darkness from controlling us, and it honors the Lord.

#### 4. Giving to those who ask (v. 42)

This does not mean we give indiscriminately at every occasion. It means a willingness to be generous when we can.

“Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is the power of your hand to do so.” (Prov. 3: 27)

“But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but indeed and in truth.” (1 John 3: 17-18)

#### 5. Loving your enemies (v. 43-44)

This is yet another example of teachers of the law taking a biblical concept into a wrong direction. There was no biblical requirement to hate our enemies. This was a Rabbinic addition. Historically, one could have argued that in the Old Testament the Lord almost required Israel to hate some groups of people who they were commanded to exterminate, such as the Cannanites and Amalekites. However, this was never intended to become a personal hatred towards individuals. This was demonstrated in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

We are not just to love those who love us or those we think are worthy of our love. We were not worthy of God’s love but God loved us when we were His enemies (Rom. 5: 7-10). We are to follow our Father’s example (v. 45).

