

### OVERCOME EVIL

Let's recap. Jesus, baptized by John in the river Jordan, his mission tried and tested in the wilderness, begins his ministry in Galilee, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is breaking in." He calls some disciples to follow, shows up in synagogues to proclaim the good news of God's kingdom at hand, and as evidence of that kingdom and its world-changing power he heals the sick and diseased. Then he begins to teach this kingdom's way of life—"Blessed are the poor, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for justice, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers"—the Sermon on the Mount. Here, on the mountain, in the person and teaching of Jesus, God and God's way is being made manifest. As at other times and on other mountains, God shines forth in this moment of epiphany. Listen. Pay attention.

Jesus teaches the Way and shows us the way to follow. You are the salt of the earth. Be salty. You are the light of the world. Let your light shine. I have come to fulfill the law and the prophets. So, live in true faith and covenant with God and your justice and righteousness will exceed that of the most pious Pharisees and the religious elite. You've heard it said, but I say to you . . . Jesus teaches with authority. This is what the Torah means! This is the way in which God wants us to walk, the way to live. Listen. Pay attention.

So, we are in the midst of the six antitheses of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. You've heard it said, but I say to you . . . In each case, Jesus does not give a new law, but calls us to a new way of life, to deeper meaning and following of God's way. For example, the meaning of 'You shall not kill' begins in the heart with anger and desires for revenge and retaliation. Jesus goes to the heart of the law.

And so we come to the antitheses about 'An eye for an eye' and 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' Jesus says that God's Way, the Torah of God's kingdom and reign, does not practice violence, revenge and retaliation. God's way is holy: "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." God's way is different from the world's way. As in Leviticus, to be holy as God is holy transforms our way of living, how we treat one another in the real world. To be holy means doing good to our neighbor, particularly the poor. To be holy means loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. In the way of Jesus, to be holy, to be a disciple of Jesus, means loving our enemies and doing good to all, whether deserving or not. That's what it means to be true, whole and complete in God's kingdom. "Be perfect, true, whole, complete, even as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Jesus says that violence begets violence and revenge and retaliation continue the cycle of violence. To say otherwise is a lie. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth leaves the world blind and toothless. In his 1967 book *Where Do We Go from Here?*, here's what Martin Luther King, Jr. writes:

The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. So it goes. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

God did not create us to kill each other. But since Cain and Abel, we have become a people enchanted with violence. At every turn, we justify our anger, hatred and violence. And it is always, always contrary to God's will for the world of his creation. If you think otherwise, then you deny the Way of Jesus.

So, let us not pretend. Just because the world, the culture, our country, our politics justifies revenge and retaliation, war and violence does not mean that God says 'Yes'. We love our weapons, our bombs, our guns, you name it. We love them. We are a violent culture. Our culture breeds violence. We are heirs of Constantine who perverted the Way of Jesus and turned it upside down. Whereas once there were no Christians in the imperial armies, when Constantine decided to make his empire officially Christian, within a generation soldiers of the empire had to be Christian. Go figure. The early Church was pacifist. Later, Christians are the sword of the empire. Augustine recognized the sad irony. He and others developed the 'just war' theory, which put very strict limitations on the possibility of going to war. But we don't much care about that anymore, do we? Surely we've gone in the direction of so-called sacred violence, justifying violent retaliation. We've bought hook, line and sinker the way of Constantine, not the way of Christ.

Jesus gives us a very different vision, an alternative reality. Jesus says that even limiting our violent revenge, as does the Torah, with its 'eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth', still leaves the world blind and toothless. Jesus says, "Do not retaliate." That's what the Greek word means. The word 'resist' means armed resistance or vengeance. And Jesus says, Don't do that. It doesn't work. You may feel justified, and certainly in the eyes of the world you are, but it's not God's way of life. And so he gives three examples of nonviolent resistant. (1) Somebody, the Lord of the manor, the master or his manager strikes you are your right cheek, a hard slap with the back of his hand. It does no good to retaliate, so you stand up and offer the other cheek. (2) Your wealthy creditor has your coat as collateral and he demands full payment of the debt you owe, and there you are in court being sued for payment of the debt; give the rich man your last stitch of clothing. Stand there naked before him, for all to see. And (3) the soldier or other representative of the Roman Empire demands that you carry his pack one mile, as he is legally permitted, but you do not set the pack down after one mile. You continue walking. He knows he cannot require more than one mile. He becomes worried that you are getting him into trouble. Rob the oppressor of his power to humiliate. Act honorably and peaceably. When physically struck at his trial, did not Jesus say, "If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?"

Friends, the Bible does not say that we are not to challenge, contradict, withstand or oppose evil. This is what the Bible says, "Do not repay evil for evil. Beloved, never avenge yourselves. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

If the Egyptian citizens in Tahrir Square had come in violence, then Mubarak and his regime would have justified a violent put-down of an armed rebellion. So, the nation of Israel justifies its continued oppression of Palestinians, because some Palestinians continue their violent revenge for Israeli wrongs. The cycle of violence continues. Martin Luther King, Jr., a pastor of the church, managed to bring American racism to its knees because he and his followers were willing to suffer rather than inflict suffering. Gandhi, through organized nonviolence, conquered the powerful and often violent empire of Great Britain. Enough people in South Africa learned the lesson so they finally brought down apartheid. What about us, we North American Christians? We have so many hammers that we imagine every problem to be a nail. We have so many weapons we imagine we can overcome evil with evil, overcome violence with more violence—gun for gun, terror for terror.

“You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.” “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” “Does not God make the sun rise and the rain fall on the evil and the good, the just and the unjust?” Pay attention. Listen. Let us follow God’s example. Let us follow in the Way of Jesus. Jesus’ way is the Third Way. Not violent revenge and not passive surrender. Neither fight nor flight, but a third way—the power of love, the power of goodness that overcomes evil.

Goodness is stronger than evil; love is stronger than hate;  
light is stronger than darkness; life is stronger than death;  
vict’ry is ours, vict’ry is ours, through God who loves us.  
vict’ry is ours, vict’ry is ours, through God who loves us.

When our song says peace and the world says war, we will sing despite the world.  
We will trust the song, for we sing of God,  
who breaks the spear and sword and stills the storm of war.

**To God Alone Be Glory.**

**Amen.**