

The Loving Response
Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Matthew 5:38-48
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Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy. When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God.

You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the LORD.

You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling-block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.

You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the LORD.

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

Matthew 5:38-48:

"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 cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing

than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

There is a local neighborhood that has a group of regular dog walkers who know each other by their daily outings with their dogs. Sometimes, they know the dog's name for first, for awhile before knowing the owner's name. There's a group that gathers and socializes as the dogs frolic and play, and others who walk together nightly down the bike path. It so happened that one late afternoon, one dog-walker who likes to walk while on the cellphone, passed by another dog-walker, who found it disturbing.

"I come out here for peace and quiet with my dog, not to have to listen to YOU on a conversation on your PHONE!" To which the phone-talker replied, "You are grumpy old person! This is a free country and I'll talk to whoever and do whatever I want out here!" These 2 dog-walkers, who once had greeted each other congenially, suddenly were at war. They complained about one another to others in the neighborhood, and scowled at one another when passing by, with clenched fists, both feeling equally that they were in the right.

The passages today speak about holiness. "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy," it reads in Leviticus, in what is known as the Holiness Code. The Holiness Code gives a list of laws that depict ethical concerns, similar to the Ten Commandments. You shall not reap to the edges of your field or strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien. You shall not steal, deal falsely, lie, take false oaths thus profaning the name of God; you shall not defraud, delay payment to workers, insult the deaf and blind; you shall not slander, take vengeance or bear a grudge, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

You shall be holy, and we may think of this "holy" as in being whole, complete, which then relates to the last line of the Matthew passage: be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect. The Greek word used here for perfect implies wholeness, or reaching one's intended outcome. Our intended outcome as Christians is to be the person God intends us to be, and this presents a challenge given the list of commands in both passages on how to do this. For example, "When someone strikes you, turn the other cheek." This is not a simple command. It is counter-intuitive, counter-cultural, and downright controversial.

I remember being so relieved when I heard that the true meaning of this command from Jesus to "turn the other cheek," was actually subversive, because when people struck in dominance it was with the back of the right hand; thus, turning the other cheek would not allow the striker to strike again in dominance. Similar interpretations of subversion have been made of being sued for the coat and offering the cloak (public nudity brought shame on the viewer), and being forced to go a mile and going the second mile (Roman law prohibited and brought

disciplinary action on forcing inhabitants of the occupied territories to carry messages and equipment further than a single mile).

But then what do we make of the command before these, “Do not resist an evildoer?” or those after, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Though we may appreciate the subversive nature of the interpretation of “turn the other cheek,” we need to take into account the entirety of the passage. God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. The context of the Matthew passage is the brutal soldiers of the Roman Empire who held the power of life or death over the Israelites. These were the evildoers. Think: crucifixion. These were the enemies at that time. This is perhaps who Jesus was calling his disciples to love in this section of the Sermon on the Mount when he says to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

The commands Jesus gives, then, do not imply subversion, but giving in. Is that what Jesus is telling us? To give in to the oppressor? To give up? To do the exact opposite of what seems reasonable and right?

Well what were their choices? What were their options?

The new documentary, entitled “13th”, assesses the 13th amendment, the abolishment of slavery, and in particular the clause within it, “except for punishment for a crime.” The 13th amendment reads, “Slavery is unconstitutional except for punishment for a crime.” The abolishment of slavery had huge economic implications. An entire sector of free labor was now gone. The clause in the 13th amendment conveniently allowed for a new law to be created that kept the original system of slavery in place, a theory discussed in the recent book, *The New Jim Crow*, by civil rights lawyer Michelle Alexander. After the emancipation proclamation, nine Southern states adopted vagrancy laws, meaning it was illegal to be unemployed.

Let’s consider this. Slavery is abolished, leaving four million newly freed black people without work. And a law is instituted that makes unemployment illegal. So now, instead of being slaves, black people are immediately criminals and imprisoned. Eight of the states enacted convict laws allowing for the hiring-out of county prisoners to plantation owners and private companies, and, remember, slavery was acceptable in the case of punishment for a crime, so the work force remained. Was slavery, then, actually abolished? If the prisoners, who were jailed for being unemployed, were now once again working without pay?

It’s the same system with different language. W.E.B. DuBois says in his book, *Black Reconstruction in America*, “The slave went free, stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery.” Alexander speaks to this reinterpretation of the same system throughout our country’s history, how the oppression of black

people is continually revised as laws change to keep the oppressive and segregated system in place.

We had a church outing last Sunday to see the play *Native Son*. The play takes place in Chicago in 1940. I didn't know that back then, a loaf of bread was 4 cents on the white side of the city and 5 cents in the black neighborhoods, or that black people were charged more for rent. I didn't know of this particular system that was in place to keep black people in poverty. Did you? But then, why would it be surprising to me, when I do know that the black shipyard workers in Marin City in 1942 were unable to move to other areas of Marin after the war ended. The white shipyard workers were able to move about freely, settling wherever they desired.

So when Jesus is telling his disciples, who are being persecuted by the Romans, to love them, to turn the other cheek, to give their cloak and walk an extra mile, what is he saying? I think it helps to consider the history of those persecuted in our own country, the black population. Does fighting back help? Does yelling, making a scene, rioting, killing in revenge give an upper hand? What choice do the people have who have just been freed from slavery and are now jailed for being unemployed? To fight back? To stand up for themselves when their voices already have no power?

I think of Martin Luther King, and the Civil Rights movement, and a speech, "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence," that he gave on April 4, 1967, at Riverside Church in New York City. He begins, "I come tonight to this magnificent house of worship because my conscience leaves me no other choice. The recent statement of your executive committee are the sentiments of my own heart and I found myself in full accord when I read its opening lines: 'A time comes when silence is betrayal.' That time has come for us in relation to Vietnam." King tells about how he felt progress was being made for the poor in our country through poverty programs, and how the war in Vietnam immediately diverted and decimated those resources.

He says, "It became clear to me that the war was doing far more than devastating the hopes of the poor at home. It was sending the sons and brothers and husbands of the poor to fight and to die in extraordinarily high proportions relative to the rest of the population. We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem.

So we have been repeatedly faced with the cruel irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools. So we watch them in brutal solidarity burning the huts of a poor village, but we realize that they would never live on the same block in Detroit. I could not be silent in the face of such cruel manipulation of the poor.

We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak. Perhaps a new spirit is rising among us. If it is, let us trace its movement well and pray that our own inner being may be sensitive to its guidance, for we are deeply in need of a new way beyond the darkness that seems so close around us.

The Nobel Prize for Peace was a commission to work harder than I had ever worked before for 'the brotherhood of man.' This is a calling that takes me beyond national allegiances, but even if it were not so I would yet have to live with the meaning of my commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ. To me the relationship of this ministry to the making of peace is so obvious that I sometimes marvel at those who ask me why I am speaking against the war.

Could it be that they do not know that the good news was meant for all men -- for Communist and capitalist, for their children and ours, for black and for white, for revolutionary and conservative? Have they forgotten that my ministry is in obedience to the one who loved his enemies so fully that he died for them? Can I threaten them with death or must I not share with them my life?"

He goes on to say, "Here is the true meaning and value of compassion and nonviolence, when it helps us to see the enemy's point of view, to hear his questions, to know his assessment of ourselves. For from his view we may indeed see the basic weaknesses of our own condition, and if we are mature, we may learn and grow and profit from the wisdom of the brothers who are called the opposition.

John F. Kennedy said, 'Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.' A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring."

"These are days," he concludes, "which demand wise restraint and calm reasonableness. We can no longer afford to worship the god of hate or bow before the altar of retaliation. We have a choice today; nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation. As Arnold Toynbee says : 'Love is the ultimate force that makes for the saving choice of life and good against the damning choice of death and evil. Therefore the first hope in our inventory must be the hope that love is going to have the last word.'" Thank you, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, for your wisdom.

I see and hear this love rising up in our country today. Do you remember the energy in the room last month when many of our members spoke about their experiences at the Women's Marches in the Bay Area and across the country? This is an example of love rising up. Of the power of love. And though it may sound petty, I saw and

heard that power of love even in the commercials during the Super Bowl and the Grammy Awards. The commercials that were shown offering messages of hope and peace, not derisiveness and division. They were positive. I see our country turning to love as a way to speak out.

Before the play last Sunday, my husband parked in the shopping center behind the theatre. A shop-owner appeared and said, "There's no theatre parking here." Having just been to church, my husband took a deep breath, and chose not to say what was really on his mind. Instead, he looked at the shopkeeper, smiled, and said, "Thank you." He pulled out of the parking spot and found another nearby. And he made it to the show in the nick of time.

The two dog-walkers who were at war on the bike path ran into one another at a mutual dog-walkers memorial service last week. They saw each other after the service at the church, and they said, "Let's make up." They hugged, they laughed, they forgave, and they shared their reconciliation with the others in the neighborhood. There is peace now once again.

This is what the passage is about. The good news is that God loves unconventionally, always giving more than what is expected. And that is what Jesus calls us to do. Not to give what is expected – but to give more, give the other cheek, give your coat, go the extra mile, give, give, give and love your enemies. God gives, loves, blesses, nurtures and welcomes all, perfectly in love, and let us, with the help of Jesus Christ, do likewise.