

The Synoptic Gospels: A Journey Into the Kingdom

by Edward L. Bleynat, Jr.

Matthew
Mark
Luke

Volume II:
*From the Desert
to the Mount*

Foreword by Phyllis Tickle, best-selling author and founding religion editor of *Publishers Weekly*



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9

• CHAPTER NINE •

From the Old to the New: The Great Antitheses

In chapter 8, we considered how Matthew's Jesus addressed the Judaic law and preserved its vitality for the emerging Christian community. But, as our exploration made clear, the law must also be reinterpreted in light of Jesus' mission and ministry. That process is continued in the next phase of the Sermon on the Mount, where we begin to understand better what it means for Jesus to fulfill, rather than abolish, the law. Found in Matthew 5:21–48, the section is traditionally called "the Great Antitheses."

The Great Antitheses: An Introduction

"Antitheses" is an imperfect description of the section. The word "antithesis" means *opposition* rather than *elaboration*. The passage contains six teachings about the relationship between the OT law and the new righteousness. Several

3. Do you agree with Prof. Loader's assessment of the relationship between the fourth antithesis and the statements of Matthew 5:17–18 that Jesus did not intend to change the law? Why or why not?



Here is the fifth antithesis:

† *Matthew 5:38–42 On retaliation*

³⁸“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’

³⁹But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well;

⁴¹and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.

⁴²Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.”

1. How does this fifth antithesis strike you?
2. Do you take Jesus' statements about retaliation literally? Or do you believe he is using legalistic language to make a point about something else? How can you tell?
3. What does it mean to forego retaliation and expose oneself to abuse?
4. What does this passage say about self-defense?

A Retaliatory Thesis

The desire for retaliation is deeply imbedded in us. Who, receiving a wrong at the hand of another, does not want to turn the tables? Don't we want compensation for what we have suffered? Sometimes, even more strongly, don't we want revenge? How can these deep, visceral desires be satisfied?

Often, they cannot be. The victim, living with his own suffering, desires to inflict even more harm on the perpetrator than what he himself has sustained. The victim wants to "teach him a lesson."

If the victim succeeds, it may provoke greater reprisals still. The original wrongdoer (who may not have seen himself in that light anyway) believes he has been wounded beyond all proportion for the minor offense that he committed. Now, he cries out for revenge.

It is a maddening pattern. One person acts. The other responds from a depth of ill feeling. Then, the first comes back at him and raises the stakes.

Eventually, families and friends join in, followed by the "tribe" or the "nation-state." And so it goes, *ad infinitum*. The results can be horrific—endless cycles of violence emanating from a wrong that, if anyone remembers it, might seem trivial in retrospect.

This dynamic has left scars over the course of human events. Grudges have fired spiraling violence over recent years in places like the Balkans, Rwanda, the Middle East, and the Sudan. Their conflicts often have ancient, deep roots that sink into local collective memory and regional history. People work themselves into murderous rage over what happened even centuries earlier among ancestors and adversaries whose names are no longer remembered.

Over the millennia, cooler-headed people and social forces have joined to try to limit the cycle of violence. These restraining forces often express their will in the form of legal codes.

Legal limitations on unfettered vengeance are found as early as the culture of Sumer, the cradle of civilization located in the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. There, we encounter the Code of Hammurabi, named for a ruler who reigned from 2285 to 2242 B.C.E. His code contains an early specimen of the *lex talionis*, a common legal standard from ancient civilization that limited the scope of retaliation to proportional responses. The code provides that, when one man causes another man of equal status to lose an eye or a limb, then the

perpetrator himself must suffer the loss of his own equivalent member. An eye for an eye. But when the victim is a poorer man, then the wealthier man's penalty for the wrong is assessed in silver coinage rather than pounds of flesh.¹⁹

We find the same trend toward proportionality in the Bible. How retaliation works begins with the story of Cain and Abel. God favors Abel's sacrifice over Cain's. Cain, overcome with resentment, murders his brother (Gen. 4). But even though God punishes Cain, he also protects him, promising that a more drastic punishment will befall those who would harm him (Gen. 4:15). So, we start with the threat of taking a vengeance that exceeds the wrong someone might commit.

This theme continues through the early pages of the Old Testament. Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi, kill all the males in royal Hamor's city because his son has raped and "defiled" their sister, Dinah (Gen. 34). The brothers show no moral struggle at all in killing innocent men for another's wrong. But prudence also appears on the scene as Jacob, fearing a greater retaliation still from Hamor's allies, withdraws from the area with his extended family (*Id.*).

Once the Mosaic law is declared, God limits retaliation—at least among the Israelites themselves. The Pentateuch has its own version of the *lex talionis*, much like the one we saw in the earlier Code of Hammurabi. Chapter 24 of Leviticus contains the following verses:

¹⁷Anyone who kills a human being shall be put to death. ¹⁸Anyone who kills an animal shall make restitution for it, life for life. ¹⁹Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: ²⁰fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the

¹⁹See Barclay commentary on Matthew at 163. It is not surprising that Sumerian penalties favored the wealthy over the poor—superficially, at least. Rulers through the ages have consistently courted the wealthy to secure their own power.

It is more intriguing, though, to examine the practicality of the overall system rather than focusing on its most discriminatory aspects. For instance, if two men of equal status lose body parts—one by suffering an injury, the other by legal mandate—then each suffers comparably to the other, as do their respective families.

But socially unequal litigants have different obligations and remedies. The injured poor man receives something useful—compensation for his lost ability to earn wages—while the richer man who inflicts the injury pays the victim a sum of silver—something important, but still less precious to him than his own eye, tooth, or limb. Were the wealthier man required to surrender a body part, it would not help the poor man at all. But because he pays money instead, the system provides benefits to the injured poor man. The remedy is also less onerous for the rich man who hurt him. The final result is greater utility and less overall suffering.

injury to be suffered. ²¹One who kills an animal shall make restitution for it; but one who kills a human being shall be put to death.

Harsh as this sounds—it seems to mandate killing even someone who accidentally caused another’s death—the principle of proportionality is nonetheless entering the law of Israel. The positive side is that it acts as a restraint on the earlier practice of unbridled revenge, such as that taken by Jacob’s sons.

But, proportional or otherwise, the Mosaic law is still strict. Its provisions must be discharged, leaving no room for compassionate restraint. Deuteronomy 19:21 counsels as follows:

**²¹Show no pity:
life for life,
eye for eye, tooth for tooth,
hand for hand, foot for foot.**

The directive seems clear; there is no room for pardoning the responsible party, or even commuting his sentence. But was this pitilessly harsh mandate always applied? It seems not.

The Barclay commentary on Matthew outlines some practical developments and applications of this retributive strand of the Jewish law, so that the loss of an eye was not automatically followed by the dismemberment of the responsible party. Instead, a resolution and adjustment of the parties’ rights and responsibilities was accomplished by the payment of money under the *Baba Kamma*, a document describing wrongs and remedies. The required amount was a sum as equivalent as possible to compensate the injured person for the loss of the body part itself, as well as for lost wages, medical expenses, and even dignity.²⁰ Thus, one person gave up the financial equivalent of his own eye or tooth for having caused another to lose the real thing. This process was a movement further away from the brutal and useless infliction of suffering, and toward something that places at least the financial burden of loss on the responsible party.

²⁰See Barclay at 164–165.

A Non-Retaliatory Antithesis

Then, along comes Jesus to upset the apple cart once again. Instead of reaffirming the ancient rights and responsibilities of the *lex talionis*, Jesus directs his disciples *to give up their legal rights!* “Do not resist the evildoer,” he says. A disciple must not only avoid seeking compensation for wrongs, but must refrain from retribution. He is even to go overboard in his acts of accommodation toward the other.

Jesus is calling for an end to the cycle of violence. Were we to heed what he says, then the spiraling madness of act, reprisal, retaliation, and escalation would end. The operative idea, one that goes to the root of the Mosaic law, is forgiveness in practice. “If this is to end,” Jesus directs his disciples, “let it end now, with you and I being the last ones to suffer.”

The Examples

Having considered the context of violence that Jesus addresses, we look now at the specific examples he uses to show movement away from “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”:

*Do not resist an evildoer.
But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek,
turn the other also.*

The striking of a person on the right cheek was a combination of insult and assault. It was done with the back of one’s own right hand. A backhanded slap delivered the message that the person on the receiving end was an inferior, one unworthy of being struck with a fist—the way that equals fought.

When a disciple receives this sort of blow, he is instructed not to resist. He is also told to offer the left cheek as well. The opportunity is seemingly presented for more of the same.

There is some thought, though, that Matthew's Jesus is not instructing his disciples to offer their other cheek to be easily stricken.²¹ Instead, he is instructing them to stand their ground but turn their heads in a way that simultaneously invites a second blow and makes it impractical. In *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium*, Walter Wink, professor of Biblical Interpretation at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York City, illustrates ways in which the examples of non-retaliation might have been lived out in the new community. You might envision receiving a backhand from a right-handed person across your right cheek, forcing your head to turn to the left. But if you then turn your head to present the left cheek, it can only be hit with a right-handed person's fist—a blow that acknowledges equality.²² Under this interpretation of the passage, the disciple is not being asked to submit himself to repeated abuse. Nor is he being asked to withdraw from the encounter. Instead, he is being instructed both to forego retaliation and almost to “invite” another sort of blow—one among equals, from the fist. He is simultaneously making it impractical to allow another insulting blow from the backhand.

While this is certainly an appealing idea—especially if it works!—the wording of the NRSV does not indisputably indicate that type of encounter. Instead, it implies that offering the other cheek is intended to allow, rather than impede, a further assault. “Turn the other also.”

And yet, we see this: Whether turning the other cheek is an invitation or a taunt, the outcome can be the same. The perpetrator has already failed to instill fear and cringing. He has been given no incentive to compound his own acts of violence. The confrontation draws to a close. Someone who has already struck the victim once might be shamed by the peaceful response he encounters so that he ceases the attack altogether. When that occurs, the cycle of violence ends before escalation can begin.

Even so, the point does not seem to be to manipulate the tormentor into better behavior. Though that may be a result, it is not the purpose. The purpose is to live as God would have us live.

²¹I am indebted for this section to an excellent sermon that the Rev. Tom Hughes of Trinity Episcopal Church in Asheville preached, where he introduced the congregation to the Walter Wink interpretation of the antithetical examples discussed below.

²²Wink at 101–102.

The question remains: Is this a literal command? Or is Jesus using a frightful scenario to show his disciples that their duty is to transcend the ways of the world? They are not called to meet violence with violence. Nor are they to skulk away in retreat. Instead, they are to stay about the business he has called them to pursue, neither repaying evil for evil nor abuse for abuse (1 Peter 3:9). Resilience in the face of suffering is in keeping with kingdom ethics.

*If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat,
give your cloak as well.*

This example moves beyond peaceful resistance toward a patently absurd way to respond to someone's confrontational act. One person could loan another money and take the borrower's assets (i.e., his clothing) as collateral to secure repayment of the loan. If a disciple is indebted to another person who is seeking to enforce his rights, Jesus says to turn over not only the collateral, but additional assets as well.

In this situation, the disciple gives up some of his rights under the Mosaic law. Let's look at the history: The typical dress in first-century Palestine, using Jewish terms, consisted of a coat (more like our shirt) and a cloak (a long "toga-like outer garment that could not legally be taken away [Exod. 22:25–26; Deut. 24:12–13]").²³ This clothing could be pledged as collateral. Yet, the law was applied in a practical way. The cloak was to be returned to the borrower by night fall, so that he could stay warm.²⁴

Jesus goes a step further. The lawsuit to recover the coat is to be met with consent to its repossession—and more. The borrower is to provide the outer cloak as well. It is an extravagant abandonment of one's "rights" and a capitulation to the creditor's demands. Wink views this as an act of civil disobedience, where the witnesses to the judicial proceeding are more shamed by seeing another naked than the debtor is by being seen.²⁵ Because the lawsuit often only occurred when

²³Boring at 199.

²⁴*Id.*

²⁵Wink at 104, citing Genesis 9:20–27, where Noah's son, Ham, and his offspring are accursed for Ham having seen his father naked and in a drunken stupor.

the debtor could not repay due to exorbitant interest—as much as twenty-five percent per year—the naked debtor indicts the whole system with shame.

Even as we begin to see the radical nature of this passage, we must also consider the possibility that it is something Matthew *actually toned down* from the original. Luke 6:29, which presumably tracks Q more closely than Matthew does, has Jesus instruct the disciples to allow even thievery without retaliation:²⁶

*[F]rom anyone who
takes away your coat
do not withhold even your shirt.*

If both garments are surrendered—whether to a creditor (Matthew) or to a thief (Luke)—then the debtor ends up naked.

By this vivid illustration, Luke’s Jesus shows his followers that reliance on legal principles is ultimately of less value to the kingdom than is a radical approach that ends the dispute. Luke’s Jesus also shows that they must be willing to abandon their devotion to material goods, even necessities. Creation of a more just and merciful way of living lies at the center of the kingdom.

Agreeing to the demands of the creditor (Matthew), or even to those of the thief (Luke)—and doing still more for either than he demands—removes the barrier of “mine” and “yours” that separates each of us from the other. One who abdicates his defenses is left naked; but the one who claims the goods is left ashamed. He has exceeded all bounds of decency in pursuit of his financial interests, while the citizen of the kingdom of heaven has set aside his financial interests in pursuit of a life that is not tied to possessions.

This absurd behavior reflects a theological truth. But is it possible for us to live that way? And if not, why not?

*[I]f anyone forces you to go one mile,
go also the second mile.*

²⁶Luke uses different words than Matthew to describe the articles of clothing. He also arranges them in a more logical sequence than Matthew does. The disciple first relinquishes possession of his outer garment (Luke’s “coat”), then his inner garment (Luke’s “shirt”). This organization also suggests that Luke is closer to the original Q statement than Matthew is.

Jesus now moves from domestic relations to foreign ones. A prerogative of an army was the right to conscript occupied subjects into military service. This was one of the hated practices of the Romans—forcing oppressed people to serve their own oppressors by toting their baggage. Resentment was a natural response; resistance, a possibility; and revolutionary uprisings occurred twice within Judea, to be crushed both times by Rome.

Here, Jesus calls someone who has been pressed into the service of the Roman army by carrying a burden for a mile to take it for a second mile as well. It is another peaceful response to yet another form of oppression.

But there is another interpretation of the text in which the response bears a stinger. Roman military regulations limited the civilian's obligation to only one mile.²⁷ To voluntarily carry the burden a second mile would disarm the oppressor. It shows that the conscripted disciple is not broken by the service; that he is willing to do more; and that, should one seek to impose his will on the disciple, he may regret getting what he has asked for, as the soldier may run afoul of his own regulations.

Interestingly, Luke has no parallel to this verse. Possible reasons are that it is from Matthew's unique source, or that it is a verse of his own composition. Still another possibility shows more imagination. Some scholars think that the verse was present in Q, with Matthew including it and Luke omitting it. The reason: In telling his story to Theophilus, a Roman audience, Luke does not want to give an example of how to resist Roman authority—peacefully or otherwise.

*Give to everyone who begs from you,
and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.*

The last example illustrating this fifth antithesis has an odd twist to it. So far, the disciple has been in an apparent position of vulnerability, with the more-powerful party disarmed by the disciple's response. This characteristic is present when responding peacefully to physical violence, responding consensually to legal or financial coercion, and responding obligingly to military force. In all

²⁷Wink at 106–111.

examples, the disciple is doing more than required for someone in a position of power.

Here, the tables seem to be turned. The beggar and the borrower are supplicants coming to the disciple. The disciple is told to give to the one, and lend to the other. He is called to exercise generosity even from a position of greater power. He sets the example for others to follow, giving to those in need and not valuing possessions over human want.

There is another possible interpretation as well. It is that the beggar and the borrower are no different than the assailant, the creditor, or the military oppressor. The beggar and the borrower are two more barriers between the disciple and his own economic self-interest. In all cases, the direction is identical: Give others what they ask for.

Jesus instructs the disciples to give them at least what they need—even more likely, what they want—but do so in a way that they cannot mistake a voluntary act for capitulation. By volunteering to do more even than asked, the disciples show that they are not beholden to any man’s power, but instead are obligated to serve all men’s needs. Sometimes those needs are primarily material. Often, though, there is a more deeply spiritual need that cries out: to be shown that life is not all about financial gain and the exercise of rights; sometimes, it is about giving and the voluntary waiver of rights.

The Application

Does Jesus mean this set of directions to be taken literally? The best answer is: not all of these directions all of the time. One can only take so many blows and avoid violent death. One can only strip himself of personal effects so many times and avoid death by exposure. One can only donate so much of his time to serving “voluntarily” under military oppression and still be able to earn a livelihood. One can only give or lend all that is asked of him every so often and not be completely tapped out. Therefore, one is not required to impoverish his family and leave it to starve so that a banker or a thief can have a little more comfort.

But we should not strip down the text to the point of mere moral theory, requiring little or no sacrifice. In following these commands even once in

a while, the disciple does something of lasting value. He stops the cycle of retribution and creates a new ethic. A peaceful and accommodating response to a hostile action may confer an odd blessing on the oppressor that unsettles his conscience and leads him toward transformation. Civil rights leaders in India and the United States—men like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.—followed this practice and prevailed in advancing values of the kingdom, even at the cost of their own lives.

1. Our society is litigious; people do not like having their rights violated, then seeing the ones who did it go on their merry way without being held accountable. Legal action is the enforcement mechanism. Why is it this way? How does this trait compare with what Jesus is teaching his disciples?
2. Consider this: A husband and father with two children is hit by a speeding car on the way home and killed. The family loses his financial support, moral support, companionship, advice, and presence. What would Jesus tell the widow about how to cope with her loss? Is civil litigation a part of what she can do? What would he tell the speeding driver?
3. Another example is intentional crime. One spouse murders the other to collect insurance money and takes up full-time with a lover, now unimpeded by the obligations of hearth and home. Is this person to be allowed to go on, without interference? Or is criminal prosecution a response consistent with Christian principles?
4. The above examples address justice under the rule of law in a free country. By contrast, Jesus was addressing life as part of an occupied race not enjoying full rights of self-determination. Does that difference affect your perception of Jesus' directions? Why or why not?
5. Change the scenario from the sometimes brutal, but fundamentally just, Roman legal system under which Jesus was living to Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia. How did peaceful resistance work in those places? Does Jesus' advice require some baseline of human

decency against which to work? If that baseline does not exist, are we still called to follow Jesus' directions? Why or why not?

6. Sometimes, when people ask for something, there is a real need. Other times, it is a con game. The request for assistance may be about getting "bus fare," but the change given may actually be used to acquire addictive substances that contribute to the beggar's illness. How do you respond to these situations when you possess incomplete information, as in the case of a stranger? What about when you possess fuller information, as in the case of a familiar local vagrant?



Here is the sixth antithesis:

† *Matthew 5:43–48 To love an enemy*

⁴³"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so 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.

⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

1. How does this sixth antithesis strike you?
2. Do you take Jesus' statements about loving one's enemy literally? Or do you believe he is using legalistic language to make a point about something else? How can you tell?