

Matthew's Nonviolent Jesus and Violent Parables

BY BARBARA E. REID, O.P.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount instructs us to not return violence for violence; instead, we should be like God, who offers boundless, gratuitous love to all. But in the same Gospel Jesus tells eight parables in which God deals violently with evildoers. Which of the divine ways are we to imitate?

Every citizen of the U.S. can tell you where they were and what they were doing on September 11, 2001. I was leading a three-month study tour in Israel. I was in my room in Bethany, preparing the next day's class lecture, when one of my students alerted me that something was happening at home. As we watched the unfolding events on television, our group's reactions went from shock, to dawning comprehension, to grief for the lives lost and the families left bereft, to gratitude for the outpouring of compassion from our hosts and even from strangers on the street. My own reaction then turned to icy fear that as a nation we would not have the courage to examine the root causes of what could lead to such an attack and that we would too quickly shift into retaliation, vengeance, and violent warfare.

When Christians struggle to know how to respond to violence directed against individuals or communities, we turn to the praxis and teaching of Jesus. One text that immediately comes to mind is Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, where he teaches his disciples not to return violence for violence and to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them (Matthew 5:38-48). Jesus' followers are to behave this way because they are children of God who "makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). Just as God offers

boundless, gratuitous love to all—even to evildoers—so too must Jesus' disciples (5:48). But in the same Gospel Jesus tells eight parables in which God deals violently with evildoers. Readers of the Gospel of Matthew are faced with a dilemma. Which of the divine ways are we to imitate? Is Jesus' teaching on nonviolence in the Sermon on the Mount absolute? Or are there situations in which violence is a moral response?

NONVIOLENT RESPONSES TO VIOLENCE

There are numerous references to violence in the Gospel of Matthew, especially that directed toward Jesus.¹ From the very beginning of the Gospel, Herod seeks to kill the infant Jesus (2:13-18). Joseph's response is to take the child and his mother to Egypt, where they remain until Herod dies (2:13-15). When Joseph learns, however, that the next ruler of Judea, Herod's son Archelaus, is as murderous as his father was, he avoids the danger and moves the family to Nazareth (2:19-23). *Avoidance or flight*, then, is the first nonviolent response to violence modeled in Matthew.

In a similar vein, when Jesus first speaks to his disciples about their mission and the violence they will suffer as a result of being his followers, he advises them to flee from violent persecution to another town (10:23). Later Jesus tells his disciples: "when you see the desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place, as was spoken of by the prophet Daniel (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains" (24:15-16). The context here, however, is the violence that accompanies the apocalyptic coming of the Son of Humanity, from which none will escape. The chosen ones will be gathered up by the angels (24:31).

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus speaks of three other possible nonviolent responses to violence and persecution. First, he instructs disciples to *rejoice over persecution*: "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (5:11-12). Jesus is not encouraging disciples to seek out persecution, but if it comes as a result of speaking and acting like a prophet who advocates for those most oppressed, then persecuted disciples can rejoice in knowing they are being true to God's will for life as were Jesus and the prophets before him.

In the prayer that Jesus teaches his disciples is a *supplication for deliverance* from evil: "And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one" (6:13). In addition to other human responses to violence and evil, there must be reliance upon God's power. Similar petitions are found in John 17:15 and 2 Thessalonians 3:2.

In Matthew 5:38-48 Jesus gives the most elaborate of his teachings on how to respond to violence with *nonretaliation, nonviolent confrontation, love of enemies, and prayer for persecutors*. This teaching is in the section of the Sermon on the Mount that begins at 5:21, in which Jesus' interpretation of

Torah is set forth in a series of six antithetical statements. Jesus has said that he has come not to abolish but to fulfill the Law, and he admonishes his disciples that their righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees (5:17-20). Matthew 5:38-42 and 5:43-48 are the fifth and sixth in the series, with 5:48 summing up the entire section. Each unit begins, "You have heard that it was said....," followed by a command introduced with the formula, "but I say to you...." In each instance Jesus declares a former understanding of the Law inadequate as his interpretation places more stringent demands on his followers.

The fifth unit (5:38-42) concerns the law of retaliation: "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (Leviticus 24:20). Based on the principle of equal reciprocity, the intent of this law was to place limits on retribution and to curtail escalating cycles of vengeance.² The response to an act of violence could not exceed the extent of the original offense. Jesus counters with, "but I say to you, do not resist [i.e., retaliate against] an evildoer" (5:39). The Greek verb for "retaliate" almost always carries the connotation of "resist violently" or "to use armed resistance in military encounters." Thus, Jesus is not telling his disciples to simply submit to or ignore an evildoer; rather, he advises them to respond – but not with violence. Jesus then gives four examples (verses 39b-42) of how one might concretely do this.

In the first three illustrations the advice is directed to one who is a victim of an injustice inflicted by a more powerful person. In each case, retaliating with the same action by the injured party is not a realistic option; submission is the expected response. Neither of these is what Jesus advocates. Rather, he gives examples of an alternate way for the injured person to respond that actively confronts the injustice with a positive and provocative act that short-circuits the cycle of violence and begins a different cycle, carrying with it the expectation that it will be reciprocated.³

In the first example (5:39b), a person is struck on the right cheek. Only the right hand was used to hit, so what is described is a backhanded slap, meant to insult and humiliate. It might be done by a master to a slave or a wealthy landowner to a poor farmer. For a subordinate to return the insulting slap would be suicidal, serving only to escalate the cycle of violence. But neither does submission restore justice. Turning the other cheek is a provocative response that robs the aggressor of the power to humiliate. Instead, the one who intended to shame ends up shamed. In this way a less powerful person is able to reciprocate – dishonor for dishonor. In so doing, the subordinate one interrupts the cycle of violence, which is the first step toward restoration of justice.

The second example concerns a debtor who stands naked in court, handing over both under and outer garments to a creditor who demands the very tunic from their back (5:40). This is a provocative, indeed, shocking act that places shame not so much on the debtor as on the creditor. Genesis 9:20-27 and Isaiah 20:1-6 show that it is the one who views another's nakedness

who is shamed. Stripping naked in court exposes the greed and injustice of the economic system to which the creditor ascribes and opens the possibility that such a one may now perceive the basic humanity that unites the two.

The third example (5:41) involves forced labor, likely a Roman soldier compelling a Palestinian subject to carry his pack. It is yet another illustration of how a subjugated person can refuse to be humiliated and can turn the tables on the oppressor. Seizing the initiative, the subjugated one destabilizes the situation, catching the soldier off guard, making him worry that he may face punishment for imposing excessive conscripted labor.

In the fourth illustration (5:42), the person in the superior economic position is addressed. In its literary context, it implies a situation in which there is injustice, presumably poverty and indebtedness exacerbated by exploitive taxes. Nonretaliation on the part of the lender would mean not asking for the return of the money or goods given. In this way, justice results from a more equitable distribution.

In sum, Matthew 5:38-42 commands nonretaliation as a strategy toward the restoration of justice in specific kinds of violent confrontations between persons of unequal power and status. Interrupting cycles of violence and initiating new cycles of generosity that can be reciprocated fulfills the intent of the Law to restore justice.⁴ The examples in verses 39b-42, like parables, arouse the imagination in a way that enables the hearer to contemplate new possibilities of action when confronted with other situations of violence.

The sixth antithesis (5:43-48) deals with a related issue. It too begins with a statement of the Law, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy'" (5:43), and is followed by Jesus' interpretation, "But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'" (5:44). The command to love the neighbor is quoted from Leviticus 19:18, but nowhere in the Hebrew Scriptures is there a command to hate the enemy. Leviticus 19:18 commanded Israelites to practice deeds of covenant fidelity toward one another, as compatriots and fellow believers. Such was not demanded in interactions with those outside the covenant community. "Hate your enemy" (5:44) can be understood as "love less," or, "love your neighbor *only*." Jesus' command, "love your enemy" redefines "neighbor" (as in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:29-37) and enjoins the same treatment for those outside the covenant community as for those inside (for a precedent see Leviticus 19:34 and Deuteronomy 10:19). Concrete examples of such love include praying for persecutors (5:44) and welcoming outsiders (5:47).

Verses 45-48 give the motivation for loving enemies: a disciple of Jesus must act this way because this is how God acts, making the sun rise on the evil and the good, sending rain on the just and the unjust (5:45). Because God's love is indiscriminate, children of God are to love their enemies and not retaliate toward an evildoer in kind. Interrupting cycles of violence, initiating new cycles of indiscriminate loving deeds (even if unreciprocated),

treating enemies as those bound by covenant relationship, praying for persecutors, and initiating relationship with outsiders is a sampling of how disciples of Jesus fulfill the Law, moving toward maturity (5:48) in imitation of God's righteousness. The word *teleios* in 5:48, usually translated "perfect," connotes not so much moral perfection, which is unattainable, but rather completeness, maturity, and full development. The *Revised English Bible* translation captures this nuance: "There must be no limits to your goodness, as your heavenly Father's goodness knows no bounds."⁵

The focus is the resultant good for the disciple: the reward gained (5:46), or the extraordinariness of their righteousness (5:47), as they mature in relationship with God. A disciple must love enemies in imitation of God because it is the righteous thing to do. There is no assurance that the love will be effective or be reciprocated. What is also unstated, yet implied, is the effect on the evildoer or the enemy. Just as God's offer of indiscriminate love and graciousness to the unrighteous aims to bring them into right relation, so too does that of the disciple. It invites the estranged one away from enmity into the path of forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation.

VIOLENT ENDINGS IN THE PARABLES

The portrayal of God in Matthew 5:45-48 clashes greatly with eight of Matthew's parables that end with violent consequences for those who do evil. Four of these parables are unique to Matthew: the Weeds and the Wheat (13:40-43), the Dragnet (13:47-50), Forgiveness Aborted (18:23-35), and the Final Judgment (25:31-46). In the other four – Treacherous Tenants (21:33-46), the Wedding Feast (22:1-14), Faithful Servants (24:45-51), and the Talents (25:14-30) – Matthew makes the evildoing and the ensuing punishments more explicit and intense.

The punishments God metes out to evildoers include throwing them into a fiery furnace, binding them hand and foot, casting them into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, putting them to

a miserable death, cutting and breaking them into pieces and crushing them, destroying murderers and burning their city, depriving them of the presence of God, and putting them with hypocrites or with the devil and his angels for all eternity.

What has happened to the boundless, unreciprocated divine love described in the Sermon on the Mount (5:44-48)? If disciples of Jesus are

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children of God who are supposed to emulate divine ways, which are we to imitate? Further, does God change? Is divine love not so boundless after all?

SEVEN POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

There are a number of ways to explain this tension in the Matthean narrative. I will offer seven possibilities and evaluate their merits.

One possibility is that Matthew did not sufficiently understand the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Missing the point that God's love is unconditional and boundless, even when not reciprocated (5:44-48), Matthew has capitulated to the prevailing myths about violence and portrays God as acting in violent ways toward unrepentant evildoers. It is from Matthew himself, or his special source of information about Jesus, that the bulk of the violent depictions in these parables comes.

The advantage of this explanation is that it makes Jesus' teaching about God consistent, but it does so at the expense of the evangelist's trustworthiness. Another difficulty with this solution is that it is not only in Matthew that we find such violent depictions (see, for example, Luke 19:27).

A second, and opposite, possibility exists: that the above interpretation of Matthew 5:38-48 is not accurate. A reading of Jesus as advocating active, nonviolent resistance to evil could be an anachronistic reading prompted by the movements of such modern figures as Mohandas Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr. From this perspective, the violent parable endings represent the authentic voice of Jesus, not Matthew's misconstrual.

Yet, this interpretation is difficult to reconcile with the ministry and death of Jesus. In the Gospels we have no examples of Jesus' use of violence, even toward those who brutalized and executed him.⁶ Instead, in Matthew's account of Jesus' arrest, Jesus calls Judas "friend" (26:50) and admonishes, "all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (26:52). When Jesus is spat on in the face, struck, and slapped (26:67), he does not retaliate. In the resurrection appearances he says not a word about those who perpetrated the violence or the punishment they will meet, but only encourages his disciples not to be afraid (28:10), assures them of his presence with them, and sends them out to proclaim the gospel to all (28:19-20).

We would have difficulty explaining why the early Christians, by the second century, understood "love of enemies" as their universal guiding ethical principle. This was one important factor in their eschewing involvement in the Roman military for the first three centuries. One further consideration is that an example of successful nonviolent protest in first-century Palestine is known from Josephus, who relates Pilate's capitulation to the delegation of Jews who prostrated themselves and extended their necks to embrace death rather than allow Pilate's military standards to remain erected in Jerusalem (*Jewish War* 2.9.2-3 §169-174). Moreover, there is ample evidence in Greek literature and philosophy that nonretaliation and not hating the enemy was a topic of discussion in antiquity.⁷ Nonretaliation and non-

violent resistance are not only contemporary strategies for confronting evil-doers; it is not anachronistic to think that Jesus employed and taught this.

A third approach is to recognize that Matthew, like the wise scribe, brings out things old and new from his storehouse (13:52), weaving together in his Gospel traditions from various sources and with varying theologies. Thus, a strand of tradition that portrays God as extending graciousness to the unrighteous can stand alongside another strand in which God violently punishes the unrighteous, without any attempt to reconcile the contradictory portraits of God. The problem then confronts the believer: how to know which one to emulate in any given situation?

Another solution is to see Matthew as an ethical teacher who approaches disciples at the level at which they can apprehend the gospel. Thus, the frightening scenarios in the parables are aimed at disciples who operate at the stage of moral development where they are motivated by reward and punishment. More mature disciples are offered advanced teaching in the "love your enemies" segment of the Sermon on the Mount. But there is a problem with this suggestion: what in the Gospel flags these teachings as higher and lower? How is one to know from the narrative that disciples are to progress toward love of enemies, and not go in the reverse direction—that is, resort to violence if love does not work?

A fifth possibility is that the powerful males in the parables are not meant to be metaphors for God. Rather, these parables unmask the violence of these characters so as to lead the hearer to conclude that action must be taken to undo the unjust systems they perpetuate. In the Parable of the Talents (25:14-30), for example, if the hearer places his or her sympathies with the slave who hides the one talent (and presumes a worldview of limited good rather than a capitalistic stance of the possibility of unfettered increase), then the servant is not wicked except in the eyes of greedy acquirers or those who are co-opted by them, as are the first two servants. The third slave is the honorable one who blows the whistle on the wickedness of the master. The parable functions, then, as a warning to the rich to stop exploiting the poor and encourages poor people to take measures that expose such greed for the sin that it is. The violent ending (25:30) is a sobering, realistic note of what can happen to those who oppose the rich and powerful.⁸

A difficulty with this line of interpretation is that in two of the parables this meaning is not possible for the final redaction of the text. In the Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat the one who sowed good seed is explicitly identified with the Son of Humanity (13:37). And in the Parable of the Unforgiving Debtor the king who hands the slave over to the torturers is explicitly equated with the heavenly Father (18:35).

Another explanation is that the kind of nonviolent confrontation of evil that Jesus advocated in the Sermon on the Mount is not applicable to the kind of situation envisioned in these eight parables. All of them portray an

end-time setting with a reckoning that is final. As Matthew describes it (so this theory goes), nonviolent confrontation of evildoers is not pertinent to scenes of end-time judgment. The teaching in the Sermon on the Mount applies to what disciples do in the here and now to confront perpetrators of evil in such a way as to convert them and to safeguard against becoming an evildoer oneself by not imitating the violence of the aggressor. The violent

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endings in the parables are speaking about a different situation entirely. They depict what happens when the time for conversion is past and the moment of final reckoning has arrived. They portray in figurative language the dire consequences of not becoming a disciple. Judgment is real and it is final. For those who have acted uprightly, the end is not a time to be feared, but a welcome relief

as they are embraced into eternal life in God's realm with the righteous. Not so for evildoers.

This interpretation satisfactorily resolves the tension: there is no longer a difficulty for disciples about which manner of divine action to imitate. The final separation of good and evil depicted in violent ways in the eight parables takes place at the end time and it is to be done by God, not by human beings. The problem is that often Christians are tempted to apply this end-time dichotomizing of evildoers and righteous ones in the present. Disciples can easily hear an assurance that they belong to the saved while others who they perceive as evildoers are condemned. Making rigid demarcations between good and evil in the present time does not allow them to face the mix of righteousness and wickedness within each person and each community in the present. Not perceiving one's own capacity for evil is one sure step toward being able to regard another as enemy and as the embodiment of evil that must be rooted out, even by violent means if need be. Reading that God punishes evildoers violently, human beings in positions of power may understand the Gospel as giving divine approbation to their meting out violent punishment, even execution, to those judged as evildoers.

The seventh and final interpretative possibility is that God does not change from being all loving and gracious to becoming vindictive and violent at the end time. If divine love remains constant, God does not actively mete out cruel punishment, but those who refuse to imitate the gratuitous, unearned love of God choose instead to fuel the cycles of violence, and thus,

by their choice, become victims of this violence themselves. The Parable of Forgiveness Aborted (18:23-35) best illustrates this. The first servant who is forgiven a huge amount is expected to understand the king's behavior and to replicate it. Instead, he does the opposite with another slave who is his underling. If that is the preferred tactic of the first servant, then the king obliges him by treating him in the very manner he has used toward the second servant. Love and graciousness are freely given by God, but the price tag is to go and do likewise.

CONCLUSION

While each of these solutions has value, it is the last two that most satisfactorily resolve the tension of how God acts, as exemplified and taught by the Matthean Jesus. The gift of love, even of enemies, and the command that this be emulated by disciples, stands at the core. Precisely how that is to be enacted remains to be discerned in each specific circumstance. The Sermon on the Mount gives examples that serve to jog the imagination into new possibilities of action toward perpetrators of violence that neither ignore the wrongdoing nor retaliate in kind. What it does not provide is a ready-made solution for all occasions.

It does not give immediately apparent answers to how Christians are to respond when they are victims of violence with little or no power of choice to respond. Matthew 5:38-48 implies that the disciple has a certain measure of power to choose how to respond to an aggressor. What is to be done when this is not the case?

Another question concerns the disagreement in Christian tradition over whether "love your enemy" applies to international foes. Two streams of tradition have held sway: just war theory and Christian pacifism.⁹ Can both be correct interpretations of Matthew 5:38-48? As Christians today try to resolve these difficult questions, it is most important to take into consideration the stance of Matthew's community: responding to violence with violence is not a moral option.¹⁰

NOTES

1 By "violence" I mean the exertion of force – physical, mental, emotional, psychological, or economic – that is injurious or abusive toward another. By this definition there is no "good" violence. All violence hurts not only the victims, but the perpetrators as well (see Gerard A. Vandelaar, *Beyond Violence* [New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1998], 32-33). In this article I confine my remarks to interpersonal violence.

2 See Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, Third Edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

3 For more on this interpretation, see Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 175-184.

4 Other New Testament sayings move in the same direction, including Romans 12:17, 21; 3 John 11; 1 Thessalonians 5:15; and 1 Peter 3:9. There are also examples in the Old Testament, and in Greek literature and philosophy. See William Klassen, *Love of Enemies:*

The Way to Peace, Overtures to Biblical Theology 15 (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 12-71.

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6 Some object that Jesus acted violently in the Temple incident (Matthew 21:10-17; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46; and John 2:13-17). But this cannot be the case when violence is understood to be the exertion of force that is injurious toward another. In Matthew's account, the emphasis is on Jesus exercising his authority over the Temple as the authentic Teacher who fulfills Scripture; furthermore, he heals the blind and the lame who come to him in the Temple (21:14). Likewise, Jesus' harsh language toward the scribes and the Pharisees in Matthew 23 is not an act of violence, but is a prophetic denunciation that names their wrongdoing with the intent to convert them.

7 For example, Plato presents Socrates as arguing against requiting evil with evil (*Crito* 49a-e). Epictetus records as a principle of the Cynic philosophers: "While enduring a flogging one must think as a brother and love his very floggers" (*The Discourses* 3.22.54).

8 For this approach, see William R. Herzog II, *The Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

9 See Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Love Your Enemies: Discipleship, Pacifism, and Just War Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994). Also see the articles and study guides in *Peace and War, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics* 10 (Summer 2004), available online at www.ChristianEthics.ws.

10 Parts of this essay are borrowed, in somewhat altered form, from my paper "Violent Endings in Matthew's Parables and an End to Violence," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66.2 (April 2004), 237-255. I thank the editor for permission to use the material.



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