

How To Stop Being An Echo

Rich Nathan

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Life As It Was Meant To Be Series

Matthew 5.38-48

Back in 1960 a brilliant psychiatrist named Robert Coles was serving in the Air Force in New Orleans. New Orleans, at the time, was ablaze with racial violence and social upheaval. So this psychiatrist, Robert Coles, decided to go to one of the elementary schools to see what was going on. Outside of this school he saw a mob of people screaming and cursing. He asked one of the people in the crowd, "What's happening?" He was answered, "She's coming out in a half hour."

"Who is coming out?"

And then Dr. Coles heard this string of foul language directed at who was coming out. He decided to stay and out from this elementary school came a little African American girl named Ruby Bridges. She was escorted by Federal Marshals. As she came out, people called her this and that name. They shook their fists at her. They told her that she was going to die, that they were going to kill her, and that they were going to kill her family.

Dr. Coles waited for who was going to come out of the school next. He discovered that no one else was coming out. The school had been totally boycotted by the white population. Here was this little African American girl going to an elementary school all by herself in the Fall of 1960. This is part of our recent American history.

Since Dr. Coles was a psychiatrist and his specialty was stress in children, he thought, "Here is a great opportunity for me to do a study on stress." He figured he could present another paper at the American Psychiatric Association. So he began visiting the family. He talked with Ruby. He said, "Ruby, how you doing?"

She said, "I'm OK."

He talked with her mother, Mrs. Bridges. He asked, "How is Ruby doing?"

Her mother answered, "She is doing just fine."

So he began to ask more probing questions to see signs of stress.

"Mrs. Bridges, is Ruby sleeping OK?"

"Oh, she is sleeping just fine."

"How is her appetite?"

"It's fine."

"Are you sure she is eating well?"

"Yes, she's fine."

"How do you think Ruby is doing with her friends when she comes home from school?"

"Ruby is fine when she comes home from school. She plays. She sometimes reads from the books she brings home. She is in 1st grade and learning how to read."

"Does she seem upset?"

"No, she doesn't seem upset."

Well, Dr. Coles figured that these parents were not bright enough to pick up signs of emotional distress. After all, the Bridges' were illiterate and extremely poor. They couldn't even sign their own names. Mr. Bridges worked as a janitor. Mrs. Bridges took care of her three small children from morning until night. And then after she tucked her children into bed, she would go to the houses of more affluent white people and get down on her knees to scrub their floors. After that, she would come home in the middle of the night, get a few hours of sleep, and then start it all over again the next day. These were two people who wanted a better life for their children.

Well, one day Dr. Coles had a conversation with Ruby Bridges. He said, "Ruby, your teacher said that she saw you talking to some of the people outside the school."

Ruby said, "I wasn't talking to any of the people."

Dr. Coles said, "Well, your teacher said she saw you talking to them."

Ruby answered, "I told her I wasn't talking to them. I was just saying a prayer for them."

"Ruby, you pray for the people out there?"

"Oh yes."

"Why do you do that?"

"Because they need praying for."

"Why do you think you need to pray for them, Ruby?"

"Because I should."

"Why?"

"Because I should."

Then Ruby's mother came into the room. She said, "We taught Ruby that it is important that she pray for these people." She said that Ruby had these people on a list and that she prayed for them at night as well.

“Why do you do that, Ruby?”
“Because I should.”

Mrs. Bridges said, “Well, they need praying for.” And then Mrs. Bridges said, “We pray for them in our Sunday School class at church.”

Dr. Coles found out that the Baptist minister at their African American church publicly prayed for the folks who were screaming at little Ruby. Dr. Coles was literally shocked by what he was hearing. He said to Mrs. Bridges, “Don’t you think that that is a lot to ask for from a 6-year old? To pray for people who are yelling at her?”

Mrs. Bridges answered, “We are not asking her to pray for these folks because we want to hurt her or anything. But we think we all ought to pray for people like that. We think Ruby should too. Don’t you think they need praying for?”

Dr. Coles concluded his article saying that if it was him, and people were doing that to him or to his family, he would have called the police. Of course, that option wasn’t open to the Bridges. The police were on the side of the screaming crowd. Dr. Coles would have hired an attorney, but that option wasn’t open to the Bridges either. They didn’t have the money for an attorney. Dr. Coles would have written letters and rallied political support. Most of all, he would have been furious, absolutely enraged at the treatment he was receiving.

But at age 6, Ruby Bridges discovered that her life, her emotions, and her reactions did not have to be determined by other people. She could rise above the crowd. At age 6, Ruby Bridges discovered that she didn’t have to be a passive victim. She could be stronger than all of the protestors by forgiving them and praying for them. At age 6, Ruby Bridges discovered that she didn’t simply have to echo the hatred and the bitterness that was all around her. She could take her cues from God her Father.

She didn’t have to be an echo. She didn’t have to simply reflect back to people the same attitudes and emotion that they were showing her.

As we continue in this series from the Sermon on the Mount, I’ve called today’s message, “How To Stop Being An Echo.” Matthew 5.38-48.

SLIDE

Mt 5:38 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’⁷

Mt 5:39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.

Mt 5:40 And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well.

Mt 5:41 If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.

Mt 5:42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

Mt 5:43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor⁸ and hate your enemy.'

Mt 5:44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

Mt 5:45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Mt 5:46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?

Mt 5:47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?

Mt 5:48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

In this section of scripture, Jesus says to us, "You don't have to have your life, your emotions, your reactions determined by anyone or anything any longer." You don't have to be determined by what your spouse does, by what your kids do, by what your parents say, by what your boss or friends feel, by your circumstances, by your boyfriend or girlfriend. You can rise above what other people do and what your circumstances are.

In the text that we are going to look at, Jesus is saying you don't have to be a passive victim controlled by other people. You can be stronger than anyone you encounter. In this text Jesus is teaching us that you do not have to be an echo of the dysfunction of your family, or the insanity of your work environment. You can take your cues from God your Father.

The great English preacher, John Stott, said about this particular text that this is the point at which the Sermon on the Mount is most admired and most resented.

So before you object to what you are reading here and say this is impossible, nobody can do what Jesus is suggesting without being turned into a total doormat. "Turn the other cheek, give to everyone who asks, pray for those who hurt you, love your enemies," this is unrealistic, this is impossible. We have to take account of two things: 1) We have to take account of the person who spoke these words. The person who spoke these words is Jesus of Nazareth.

As Dallas Willard put it in his book *The Divine Conspiracy*,

SLIDE

Our commitment to Jesus can stand on no other foundation than a recognition that he is the one who knows the truth about our lives and our universe. It is not possible to trust Jesus, or anyone else, in matters where we do not believe him to be competent.

Can we seriously imagine that Jesus would be Lord if he were not smart? If he were divine, would he be dumb? Or uninformed? Once you stop to think about it, how could he be what we take him to be in all other respects and not be the best informed and most intelligent person of all, the smartest person who ever lived?

In other words, before we say that this is ridiculous counsel, or that it is impossible, we need to remember that the person who said these words is the smartest person who ever lived and absolutely understands the way the world works, and what makes our lives work. He is not uninformed. He is not unrealistic. Jesus is smart.

When you read the words of Jesus, friends, do you say that? Even if I struggle with these words, even if they upset me, even if they upset my neat, tidy little world, even if these words are contrary to the advice that I've been getting all my life, nevertheless, I trust the One who spoke these words. He is the smartest person whoever lived. Therefore, I need to adjust my life accordingly.

Second, Jesus' statements have been followed by some of the greatest political leaders of the 20th century with incredible success. Mahatma Gandhi in India and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the United States. It was this particular text, Matthew 5.38-48, that drove Dr. King's entire program of non-violent resistance.

Here is what Dr. King said,

SLIDE

I can't make myself believe that God wants me to hate. I'm tired of violence. And I'm not going to let my oppressor dictate to me what method I must use. [In other words I refuse to be an echo.] We have a power, power that cannot be found in Molotov cocktails, but we do have a power. Power that cannot be found in bullets and guns, but we have a power. It is a power as old as the insight of Jesus of Nazareth [in the Sermon on the Mount].

So, let's consider the words.

SLIDE

Mt 5:38 "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'

Jesus is dealing with the ancient law of just retribution. He is quoting from Exodus 21.22-25, which says this:

SLIDE

Ex 21:22 “If people are fighting and a pregnant woman is hit and gives birth prematurely⁵ but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman’s husband demands and the court allows.

Ex 21:23 But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life,

Ex 21:24 eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

Ex 21:25 burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

Now, this law is a basic foundation for justice. The words in this law were often twisted by religious leaders in Jesus’ day to justify revenge and retribution. Actually, there were two purposes in this ancient law. The first purpose was to limit revenge. In other words, the punishment must fit the crime and no more. If you punch me and knock out my tooth, I can’t cut off your head. If you kill my cow, I cannot murder your daughter. This principle of an eye for an eye was not meant to justify revenge, but rather to limit revenge to no more than is due.

The second principle is that this law prohibited personal revenge. Carrying out the principle of justice, an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, was given to the courts and to the judges to decide. Prior to this stipulation in Exodus 21, injury to a member of one’s family could be avenged by another member of the family. This is the way it is in much of the Islamic world today. A member of the offended family takes matters into his own hands and measures out punishment. But Exodus 21, written 3500 years ago, takes the law out of people’s private hands, and puts it in the hands of an impartial, neutral judge. It prohibits personal revenge.

This law, eye for an eye; tooth for a tooth, was an accommodation to people’s sinful natures. It was like the certificate of divorce that we learned about a couple of weeks ago. The whole idea of divorce was not God’s original intention for marriage. The certificate of divorce was designed to limit sin, to fence it in, to prevent greater injustices. The principle of an eye for an eye; tooth for a tooth was designed to limit sin and to keep it within bounds, but it is not God’s highest and best for his people.

You see, the Sermon on the Mount is not designed to limit sin. The Sermon on the Mount is not designed to keep sin within certain boundaries. Instead, the Sermon on the Mount was written to set us free from sin altogether. The Sermon on the Mount is a description of God’s ultimate will for the kingdomized. That is what we keep learning. When the kingdom of God crashes into your life, when you come under God’s reign and rule, when Christ grabs hold of you, you will begin to look like the person that Jesus is describing in the Sermon on the Mount more and more.

One major area that will be dealt with in your life, if the kingdom apprehends you and if God lays hold of you, is your desire to get even with other people. You will stop being an echo of everyone around you. If your husband forgets your birthday, well, then it is no romance tonight. If she had an affair, then you are

going to have an affair. If you receive an angry email, fire off an angry email in response. Push that send button. If someone gossips about you, sulk, complain, and then gossip about them.

Jesus wants to set us free from all of that. This descending spiral of an eye for an eye, which Gandhi said we'll practice until the whole world becomes blind. This descending spiral that we see continually in divorce court where two people beat each other bloody until all of their wealth is given away to attorneys, until any semblance of civility is destroyed, communication is impossible. We're just left with bitterness and hatred. Jesus wants better lives for us.

So he says in Matthew 5:39,

SLIDE

Mt 5:39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.

So, what does Jesus say? Vv. 39-42,

SLIDE

Mt 5:39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.

Mt 5:40 And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well.

Mt 5:41 If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.

Mt 5:42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

Now Jesus is not being a Pollyanna here – Just believe that other people mean well, but they are just misunderstood. He calls people who injure us evil. V. 39,

SLIDE

Mt 5:39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person.

He doesn't theraputize other people's motives. He doesn't say to little Ruby Bridges, "Well, if you only understood the family backgrounds of the folks who were yelling at you, the culture they were raised in, the impact of racial attitudes as they are passed to one generation to another, the pain that is in their lives, you would not get angry with them."

It is absolutely the case that understanding the hurt, the pain, the cultural factors that drive people to do what they do can make us more empathetic. But Jesus is not theraputizing other people's motives. He is not saying, "Just try to

understand their dysfunctional family dynamic.” Jesus is giving us a totally different way to respond to hurt, to losses, violence, and people who take advantage of us without being echoes.

How can you and I, those of us here who are kingdomized, upon whom the kingdom of God has broken in, how can you and I who claim to live under the reign and rule of Christ not sink the level of the most negative people and the most negative circumstances, but rise above them?

The following illustrations that Jesus offers us interprets what he means by “do not resist an evil person.” What he is not urging in these four illustrations is that you become a doormat for people to wipe their feet on; just roll over and let evil reign. In each case, Jesus is teaching how those who are powerless, or those who feel powerless can become empowered; how a victim can stop being victimized; how an individual or group that has been trampled on can regain their dignity. Let’s look at these four illustrations.

First of all, v. 39,

SLIDE

Mt 5:39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.

Again, it is important to reflect on what Jesus is not saying. These verses are so often misunderstood that we need to remind ourselves what is not being said. He is not saying if someone slaps your brother on the right cheek, or if someone hits your child, or if someone takes advantage of your spouse, stand by passively and let them. Jesus is not saying you have to stand back and watch an adult beat your child, or that you need to put your hands in your pocket when your wife or girlfriend is being assaulted. He is not talking about defending weaker people.

Indeed, one of the marks of being a moral person is Proverbs 24.11-12,

SLIDE

Pr 24:11 Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter.

Pr 24:12 If you say, “But we knew nothing about this,” does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who guards your life know it? Will he not repay everyone according to what they have done?

Just as an aside, many of you have probably been reading articles about what has been going on in the Darfur region of the Sudan. Several hundred thousand men, women, and children have been killed in the Darfur. More than 2 million people have been driven from their homes. There are horrific photos taken by

former Marine Captain Brian Steidle, who was one of three US Military observers assigned to the African Union which has been an absolutely toothless force monitoring what's been going on in the Darfur.

Captain Steidle took over a thousand photos of villages that have been leveled, burned bodies, babies that have been shot in the head. He said, "All I could do is write reports and take photos." Along with many other people, he is urging Americans to write to President Bush to seek UN intervention in the Darfur to stop the genocide.

In your bulletins there is a postcard for you to sign and send to the President. Will you take five minutes this morning [evening] and add your voice to the thousands of Americans who are asking for our government's action. Take out the card, sign your name on the bottom, print your return address on the front, and then put these cards in the boxes by the doors as you leave the auditorium this morning. Let's together as a church stand up for the defenseless.

So, Jesus is not saying here, "Stand back and watch someone attack a weaker person." Indeed, I'm not sure that Jesus is prohibiting self-defense for your own person. There is a reason why Jesus said, "If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."

SLIDE

Mt 5:39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.

In the first century, this would have been the slap of contempt. To hit someone on their right cheek, if you are right handed, that means that you are slapping them with the back of your hand. In ancient Israel the slap with the back of the hand, is the slap of contempt, the slap of insult. He is not saying, "Abused wife, continue to receive blows." He is teaching us what we do with insults and signs of contempt. Do we just insult back? Do we just become an echo? He says, "No. I want you to wrest from the offender the power that he has. I want you to change the dynamics so that you are no longer a passive victim. I want you to overcome evil with good."

I just finished what has become my favorite biography of Abraham Lincoln. It is called *Team of Rivals* by Doris Goodwin. Among other things, what Doris Goodwin focuses on is Lincoln's ability to rise above insult, to take control of a situation by not being an echo.

For example, when Lincoln was still practicing law, he was involved in a very famous lawsuit that was being overseen by the most famous attorney of his day, Edwin Stanton. Stanton was a big city attorney who treated Lincoln with absolute contempt. He basically told Lincoln to go home to his backwoods practice.

Stanton said he had no time or use for Lincoln. In fact, he called Lincoln a long-armed ape.

A few years later, Lincoln became President. Do you know what he did? He offered Stanton the post of Secretary of War. Lincoln had this amazing ability to rise above humiliation, personal hurt, and the need for vendettas. He so changed the dynamic in his relationship with Stanton that outside of Lincoln's immediate family, there was no man in the world that loved or respected Lincoln more than Edwin Stanton.

Simon P. Chase, the governor of Ohio, was invited to be part of Lincoln's cabinet. For four years he gossiped about Lincoln and secretly conspired against him. Chase wanted to be the nominee in 1864 and stop Lincoln from running for a second term as President. He threatened Lincoln repeatedly with resignations. Finally, after one particularly egregious breeches of trust, Lincoln accepted Chase's resignation letter. Do you know what Lincoln did then? He didn't pound this political opponent. He didn't get his attack dogs in the cabinet to beat up on Chase while he himself remained aloof from all of it. He nominated Simon P. Chase, this political rival, to become Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

What would it mean for you to take the high road in a situation where you are insulted, or when someone shows you contempt? At the very least, remember the kingdom ought to say, "I haven't the time or interest or energy to respond to people's unfair criticisms, or their gossip. I am too busy serving the kingdom of God."

A second illustration – Matthew 5.40,

SLIDE

Mt 5:40 And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well.

In Jesus' day a lot of men only had two garments – a tunic, which was a close-fitting garment worn against the body, and a cloak, which was a loose garment worn over the tunic. At night the cloak would become a blanket. To sue for a man's tunic was a miscarriage of justice.

Jesus is saying what do you do when you are treated unjustly? What do you do when you are insulted? He doesn't say just let someone sue you. He says seize the initiative and before they can ask for anything, give them more.

Friends, what would it mean for those of you who are involved in suits and counter-suits with former spouses to stop retaliating? What would it mean for those of you who are exhausting yourself fighting over an estate to take the high

road? What would it mean for you to give someone in business what they are asking for and more and wash your heart of the whole mess?

This is not a Talmud. Jesus is not saying you can never defend yourself in court. He is talking about not being an echo.

And then in 5.41,

SLIDE

Mt 5:41 If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.

This is an act of colonial exploitation. This word “forces” in v. 41 is a military word. Jesus is talking about what happens when the Roman oppressor commandeers a Jew to carry his bags. It was the law that the Roman oppressor could commandeer any Jew to carry their bags one mile. Jesus is not saying let him exploit you or be a passive victim. Again, he is saying that you can turn the tables on this person. Before he can exploit you, offer to take the exploiter’s baggage another mile. When he forces you to be a slave, volunteer to work for him and become your own person. Jesus is empowering the powerless.

How do we communicate to someone who has power that they don’t have power over us? Martin Luther King did it using the strategy of non-violent resistance. He said,

SLIDE

Non-violent resistance is a way for the oppressed to divest themselves of passivity without arraying themselves in vindictive force.

Acting in concert with fellow Negroes to assert himself as a citizen, he would embark on a militant program to demand the rights which were his: in the streets, on the buses, in the stores, the parks, and other public facilities.

The religious tradition of the Negro has shown him that non-violent resistance of the early Christians had constituted a moral offensive of such overriding power that it shook the Roman Empire. American history has taught him that non-violence in the form of boycotts and protests had confounded the British Monarchy and laid the basis for freeing the colonies from unjust domination. Within his own century, the non-violent ethic of Mahatma Gandhi and his followers had muzzled the guns of the British Empire in India and freed more than three hundred fifty million people from colonialism.

What non-violent, non-revengeful strategy might the Lord lead you into in dealing with someone who oppresses you?

A fourth illustration – Matthew 5.42,

SLIDE

Mt 5:42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

He is dealing with a request that takes advantage of another person. Again, it is important for us to pay attention to what is not being said. The early church father, Augustine, reminds us that Jesus does not say: Give whatever someone requests of you. Rather, Jesus says: Give to whomever makes a request of you. In other words, you do not have to give money to someone on the street who you know will use the money to buy alcohol or drugs. If you give whatever is asked of you that is passive. Jesus is not urging passivity. Jesus is urging people who are disempowered to become empowered, to become active. You don't give a child whatever they ask you.

The issue continually is how do we have relationships with people who want to abuse us; who want to take advantage of us? Jesus again is saying: Seize the initiative. Go beyond the person's surface request. Get to the real need and meet that.

It takes a kingdomized person to not just brush people off. One of the things our ministry, Fruit of the Vine, our ministry to the poor in our city, has done is put together a little list of items that you can put in a bag so that when you are driving in your car and you see a guy with a sign who says, "I am out of work; will you give me some money?" You can to yourself, "Well, I am concerned about giving this guy money, but here is the bag. It has some food in it. It has some socks, a toothbrush and toothpaste."

All of these things concern how to not fight people on their level. How to not return blow for blow. How to get out of the downward cycle by rising to a higher level. How to return good for evil.

Ultimately, Jesus is asking us to act like him. We say we are his followers, Jesus says, "Then act like me." When Jesus had a blow against his face, when he was insulted and treated with contempt, when he suffered and was mistreated by a miscarriage of justice, when they took his cloak, what did he do? He prayed, "Father, forgive them."

The Roman soldier, who was standing next to the cross, knew power when he saw it. He saw this man crucified and yet he recognized his power. Jesus was not a victim. He chose the course he was going on. And the Roman soldier knew it. And standing by the cross, he looked at Jesus and said,

SLIDE

Truly, this is the Son of God.

How can we not be an echo? Matthew 5.43-48,

SLIDE

Mt 5:43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor⁸ and hate your enemy.’

Mt 5:44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

Mt 5:45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Mt 5:46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?

Mt 5:47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?

Mt 5:48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

This is the first time in this sermon that we encounter the word “love.”

SLIDE

Mt 5:43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor⁸ and hate your enemy.’

Mt 5:44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

And we encounter it in a surprising place, with a person who wants to hurt us. You know, when the kingdom of God breaks in, we practice love in surprising places. The kingdom of God is characterized by surprising love. So we read this command:

SLIDE

Mt 5:44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

You say: You can’t be serious. You can’t mean this, Jesus. This is impossible.

Jesus says: I am serious. And it is possible with the power of God. He doesn’t say to us: You must like your enemy. He doesn’t say: You must feel good feelings toward your enemy. He doesn’t say: You must fall in love with your enemy. All of these things are impossible.

The Greek word for love is “agape.” He says: You must agape your enemy. Agape is not a feeling of the heart, which you cannot help. Agape is a decision of your mind. It is love emerging out of your will. Agape is a choice. I will to do good to this other person.

Now Jesus is not Pollyanna. He calls the person an enemy. He says: I want you to love your enemies. He recognizes that there are people who want to hurt us. He does not say: Theraputize this. See this other person as a victim who is acting out of his woundedness, his pain. All of that may be true, but Jesus doesn't talk to us about that. He says: Here is what you do when you are in a situation with someone who wants to hurt you.

You have an in-law who relates to you like an out-law. Nothing you do is ever good enough. They undermine you at every turn. They exclude you from family gatherings. They snub you and turn their backs on you. What do you do?

You've got a child; you've got a parent; you've got a boss or a coworker who relates to you in a hurtful way. What do you do?

Jesus says: First of all, you make a decision to not hate this person. V. 43,

SLIDE

Mt 5:43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor ⁸ and hate your enemy.'

Nowhere does the Bible say: Hate your enemy. But this was the teaching of some of the religious people in Jesus' day. Jesus warns us about the effects of hate in our soul. Hate only multiplies hate. Hate will destroy your soul. It will distort your personality. Psychiatrists say to us that either we learn to love people or we will perish in our bitterness. Hate will shrivel you up. It will eat you alive. We choose to love because we want to obey Jesus and we want to be whole people.

Love your enemy. Do you think this has any application to the way we Americans conduct war? Do you think that Christians in America ought to be the most militaristic, most given to the use of military options by our government in conducting foreign policy? Or do you think that this command to love your enemies suggests that Christians ought to be the most suspicious, the most resistant, of the highest requirement for proof before we go to war?

I would suggest to you that these texts tilt the Christian man or woman against war unless there is an overwhelming case made for war. These texts tilt the Christian in the direction of non-violence, of peacemaking, of seeking every possible alternative before we go to war.

Richard Hayes writes about the Catholic Military Chaplain, who administered mass to the Catholic bomber pilot who dropped the atomic bomb on Nagasaki in 1945. Father George Zabelka was the Chaplain for the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bomb squadrons. He later came to repent of his complicity of the bombing of civilians. But his account of that time is a stunning judgment of the church's complicity with violence, and particularly violence against the innocent. Here is what Father George Zabelka wrote in his memoirs:

SLIDE

To fail to speak to the utter moral corruption of the mass destruction of civilians was to fail as a Christian and as a priest as I see it...I was there, and I will tell you that the operational moral atmosphere in the church in relation to mass bombings of enemy civilians was totally indifferent, silent, and corrupt at best. At worst, it was religiously supportive of these activities by blessing those who did them. Catholics dropped the A-bomb on top of the largest and first Catholic city in Japan.

One would have thought that I, as a Catholic priest, would have spoken out against the atomic bombing of nuns. Three orders of Catholic Sisters were destroyed in Nagasaki that day. One would have thought that I would have suggested that as a minimal standard of Catholic morality Catholics shouldn't bomb Catholic children. I didn't. Like the Catholic pilot of the Nagasaki plane, I was heir to a Christianity that had for seventeen hundred years engaged in revenge, murder, torture, the pursuit of power, and violence all in the name of our Lord.

As I walked through the ruins of Nagasaki right after the war and visited the place where once stood the Catholic Cathedral, I picked up a piece of a censer from the rubble. When I look at it today, I pray that God forgives us for how we have distorted Christ's teachings and destroyed his world by the distortion of that teaching. I was the Catholic Chaplain that blessed the bombing of my Catholic brothers and sisters.

If you are interested in how a Christian might pursue an alternative to war, just look up Just Peacemakers.

Well, what are we to do with our enemies? How do we love them? Here are a few things in closing:

1. Pray for them. V. 44,

SLIDE

Mt 5:44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

There is no greater act than to pray for someone. To bring an enemy into the presence of God is like taking your enemy to the doctor who alone has the medicine to heal them. You are taking your enemy to the Supreme Doctor who can heal their souls. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor, said, "When we pray for our enemy, we are doing for him what he cannot do for himself." Pray for them.

2. Embrace the Father's love for you. v. 45,

SLIDE

Mt 5:45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

You love your enemy by focusing not on how your enemy treats you, but on how your Father in heaven treats you. You are being mistreated by a family member or a coworker or a roommate. Jesus says to stop focusing on the mistreatment that you are receiving at their hands. Instead, focus on the way your Father in heaven treats you. Are we all not God's enemies? Do we all not treat God infinitely worse than anyone has ever treated us? Do we not continually show God disrespect in our rebellion?

Forget about how horrible this other person is treating you. How does God treat you? Romans 5.6-8,

SLIDE

Ro 5:6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

Ro 5:7 Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die.

Ro 5:8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Let me finish with a story. This is an absolutely true story. It blows my mind. But it is such a perfect application of the words of Jesus in this text.

About 20 years ago there was a young girl who was raped and murdered. The offender was caught, tried, and convicted. At first, her parents were consumed

by bitterness and hatred towards the offender who took their precious daughter's life. I don't blame them at all.

But soon they realized that their bitterness was destroying them more than it was destroying the man in prison. They were Christians and they realized the way to wholeness was to not be an echo, to rise above this, to practice forgiveness, to try to learn to love this enemy. And so they decided to go to the prison. They told the young man that they chose to forgive him. The man was stunned. No one had ever treated him this way before.

The parents kept visiting the man in prison. And they chose to show him love by bringing him cookies, magazines, and clothing. Their agape love, their choice decision to love slowly softened the man until one day he asked them, "Why are you doing this?"

Their answer was very simple. "Because God the Father loves you, and he commands us to love you also." That night the man became a Christian. He became a leader in the prison fellowship there. He walked with Christ for several years.

This couple continued to show him acts of kindness. The couple discovered that the man had never grown up in a family. He had no parents. He was shuttled from foster home to foster home. He had never known parental love. And so one day years into this process the couple approached the young man and said, "We've made a decision. We would like to adopt you as our son."

This couple was not an echo. They were not victims. They were not imprisoned by bitterness or hatred. They were set free to love. Let's pray.

How To Stop Being An Echo

Rich Nathan

March 25-26, 2006

Life As It Was Meant To Be Series

Matthew 5.38-48

I. Refusing To Respond In Kind (Mt. 5.38-48)

A. The Example Of Ruby Bridges

B. The Meaning Of “An Eye For An Eye” (Ex. 21.22-25)

1. Limiting Revenge

2. Eliminating Revenge

C. The Meaning Of “Resist Not An Evil Person” (Mt. 5.38)

1. Dealing With Insults (Mt. 5.39)

2. Dealing With Injustice (Mt. 5.40)

3. Dealing With Oppression (Mt. 5.41)

4. Dealing With Unfair Requests (Mt. 5.42)

II. Learning To Love Our Enemies (Mt. 5.43-48)

A. The Meaning Of Love (Mt. 5.43, 44)

B. The Practice Of War By Christians

C. The Practice Of Love

1. Prayer For Our Enemies (Mt. 5.44)

2. Imitating Our Heavenly Father (Mt. 5.45)