

“The Ethics of God’s World Part 2”

Matthew 5: 38-48

NLT 38 “You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ 39 But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also. 40 If you are sued in court and your shirt is taken from you, give your coat, too. 41 If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles. 42 Give to those who ask, and don’t turn away from those who want to borrow.

43 “You have heard the law that says, ‘Love your neighbor’ and hate your enemy. 44 But I say, love your enemies! 45 In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For He gives His sunlight to both the evil and the good, and He sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. 46 If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. 47 If you are kind only your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. 48 But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.”

The Message Here’s another old saying that deserves a second look: ‘Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.’ Is that going to get us anywhere? Here’s what I propose: ‘Don’t hit back at all.’ If someone strikes you, stand there and take it. If someone drags you into court and sues for the shirt off your back, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. And if someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant-life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.

You’re familiar with the old written law, “Love your friend,” and its unwritten companion, ‘Hate your enemy.’ I’m challenging that. I’m telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the supple moves of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives His best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a medal? Any run of the mill sinner does that.

“In a word, what I’m saying is, Grow Up. You’re kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.”

Ironically, it was a TV show titled *Do No Harm* that helped sink NBC's new lineup last winter. The series -- a modern take on the classic Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde story -- debuted on January 31, 2013, but lasted for only two episodes before the network yanked it due to miserably low ratings -- in fact, it was the lowest in-season debut for a scripted show on a major network ever. Partly because of that flop, NBC, which started the year with the highest ratings among the Big Four networks, soon sank to lowest.

NBC eventually "burned off" the rest of the already-filmed episodes later in the year by airing them in a non-primetime time slot, but, even then it garnered few viewers. We can find no analysis of why the show failed, but perhaps it's partly because of its name. Weigh "Do No Harm" against "Fast & Furious", "Falling Skies", "Breaking Bad", "Sudden Impact" and the like and it sounds so, well ... unexciting and bland. Maybe even boring. I remember a book that came out in the early 70's titled "Nice Guys Finish Last" and guys like Bart Starr and Roger Staubach didn't agree with the title.

Actually, isn't that the problem with a lot of the "be a good boy" or "be a good girl" stuff we try to teach our children and practice ourselves? The not-so-good stuff often seems more interesting and appealing. And isn't that the problem we have even with some of Jesus' words? [NOTE 1]

For example, take those in today's reading from the Sermon on the Mount: turn the other cheek, give to everyone who begs from you, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, go a second mile with the one who forces you to go the first mile, and to the one who wants to take your sweater, well, give your coat as well. Where's the thrill in doing stuff like that?

We might throw all these teachings from Jesus in the "do-no-harm" category. When someone bad-mouths you or does you wrong, you have to decide how you're going to react. You can hit back, which may well make matters worse, or you can turn the other cheek, refusing to add to the problem. You are doing no harm.

[NOTE 2] If you choose to strike back, you can find plenty of ideas online. Like www.getrevenge.com, www.thepayback.com and www.getrevengeonyourex.com. These websites, and others like them, will help you learn how to send nasty e-mails, anonymous letters, dead fish, noxious flowers and how to — in general — make someone miserable. You could do that. But if you do, you're not only NOT following Jesus, you're pretty much stepping outside socially-accepted mores and constraints. You decide.

Probably, we can quickly agree that doing no harm is a good thing, but it doesn't grip us the way confrontation and discord does. In the mid-1990s, Bill Moyers had a TV special featuring theologians, novelists and others talking together about the book of Genesis. When they got to the Cain and Abel story, they all agreed that Cain was the bad guy, but they also said that from the story angle, he was the more interesting character. Abel, who does all the right things and is approved by God, didn't generate nearly as much discussion or interest as did Cain. One of the writers even said that without Cain there wouldn't have been the conflict necessary for creating a good story.

You see, that's the problem with not doing harm; it's not something active like doing harm, or even like doing good. In many circumstances, not making matters worse is the right thing, but it's hard to generate much enthusiasm about it. But then, since when was the excitement quotient the primary measure of how we should serve God? The answer is never.

You may recognize "First, do no harm" as a tenet from the medical world, where, we understand, it's a basic principle of health care. But it also belongs to the world of

religion. In 1739, a small group of people in London approached John Wesley asking for his guidance for living spiritually upright lives. He organized them into a group to meet weekly for the purpose of spiritual growth and moral examination, and he gave them three general rules to guide their behavior. The second and third of these were, respectively, do good and practice the spiritual disciplines (attend worship, pray, study the Scriptures, etc.). Those two might well have been expected advice for spiritual development. But before mentioning those, Wesley stated his first principle: "It is therefore expected of all who continue [in the group meetings] that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation, First: By doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind"

That's bedrock Christian behavior, as Jesus' comments about cheek-turning, second-mile-going and cloak-giving suggest. And the Sermon on the Mount is not the only place in the New Testament where such do-no-harm teaching shows up. In Peter's first epistle, the apostle made this observation about Jesus: "When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten ..." (2:23). Doing no harm is not just something Jesus talked about, but also something he practiced. **[NOTE 3]**

We can also get a perspective on this do-no-harm practice from Leviticus 19 (and today's Old Testament reading), which is part of the holiness code of ancient Israel. At the beginning of the chapter, God commands the people to be holy and then goes into details. Most of the chapter is about doing no harm:

- Do not steal
- Do not deal falsely
- Do not lie
- Do not defraud your workers
- Do not create problems for the handicapped
- Do not render false judgments
- Do not slander
- Do not take vengeance

In fact, it's only after the list of how to avoid doing harm that God gives them a command about something to do: Love you neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18).

In other words, part of loving our neighbors, which is a command that Jesus also said was critical, is — wait for it — doing no harm!

One of the ways that John Wesley explained his general rule to do no harm was also from the "do not" category. He said that we should not do to others as we would not want them to do to us. That's obviously the flip side of the Golden Rule, but fully in keeping with the intention of the Golden Rule.

Almost every day we're in situations or problems and we have no idea how to make them better. But we're pretty clear on how to not make them worse.

How do we NOT make situations worse than they already are, you ask? Consult the commandments and teachings from Leviticus, but in addition, you do NOT: -

- Interfere (as a rule, this is good advice)
- Tell tales, spread rumors, etc.

- Blame others for your screw-ups
- Bore people to death by going on and on about your problems
- Vent your anger on people (family and friends, e.g.) who are not involved in your situation
- Disparage others to make yourself look good
- Bear false witness

And of course it goes without saying that you do NOT — Remember the "poo" scene in *The Help*? ...Well, you do not do that! How many of you saw the movie, “The Help”? Well one of the black American maids got so fed up with being mistreated that she made a pie with her poo in it and the high-faluttin rich lady ate it. The Christian life is not anything like that, or a remake of *Revenge of the Nerds*. Do no harm. Period.

In a little book about John Wesley's three general rules, Reuben Job gives this example: Each of us knows of groups that are locked in conflict, sometimes over profound issues and sometimes over issues that are just plain silly. But the conflict is real, the divisions deep, and the consequences can often be devastating. If, however, all who are involved can agree to do no harm, the *climate* in which the conflict is going on is immediately changed. How is it changed? Well, if I am to do no harm, I can no longer *gossip* about the conflict. I can no longer *speak disparagingly* about those involved in the conflict. I can no longer *manipulate the facts* of the conflict. I can no longer *diminish* those who do not agree with me and must honor each as a child of God. *I will guard my lips, my mind and my heart so that my language will not disparage, injure or wound another child of God. I must do no harm, even while I seek a common good.* --Reuben P. Job, *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 22. [NOTE 4]

Starting from a position of doing no harm is related to the spiritual discipline of submission. Submission is a spirit with which we view others, and in which we relate to and treat them. It's the willingness not to get our own way, and the ability to lay down the burden of needing to come out on top.

In fact, in some situations, submission is the freedom to drop the matter, to forget it, not in the spirit of "Whatever!" (which often means "I'm not going to waste any more time on you!") or with passive-aggressive behavior (which is seeming to agree with someone but actually dragging one's heels about cooperating), but in genuine willingness to let the other person have his or her say.

In fact, Richard Foster, who wrote a well-known book about the spiritual disciplines, says, "Usually the best way to handle most matters of submission is to say nothing," which he says is the kind of grace that sets others free. He also says that submission, which puts aside our own need to be the center of attention, frees us to actually value others.

Of course, submission has its limits. When it becomes destructive not to take positive action, then active love for one's neighbor needs to take over. Even in the world of medicine, with its first-do-no-harm ethic, there is a point where that must be put aside. In the chapter about treating cancer in a current book on internal medicine, there's this:

"The goal of cancer treatment is first to eradicate the cancer ... The dictum [first do no harm] is not necessarily the guiding principle of cancer therapy. When cure of cancer is possible, cancer treatments may be undertaken despite the certainty of severe and perhaps life-threatening toxicities. Every cancer treatment has the potential to cause harm, and treatment may be given that produces toxicity with no benefit. ... and most treatments are given to the point of toxicity. ... Irrespective of the clinical scenario, the guiding principle of cancer treatment should be ... 'first hasten to help.'"

In our daily lives, however, most of the situations we deal with are not cancerous. They're not extreme evil, but are rather differences of opinion or merely somebody's self-centeredness or hang-up showing. And often the way we love that neighbor or relative or spouse with whom we're not seeing eye-to-eye is by first doing no harm. At the risk of repeating ourselves:

- That may sometimes take the form of saying nothing.
- It may sometimes take the form of not passing along gossip.
- It may sometimes take the form of giving the other person some space and time to work things out.
- It may sometimes take the form of compromise and seeking the common good.
- It almost always requires our thinking about what doing no harm means in that particular situation, and then practicing what we've concluded.

Earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his audience "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). Since the Pharisees were known for their zealous and fastidious keeping of the Law of Moses, this statement must have at first stunned Jesus' hearers. Unless their righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees they won't enter the kingdom of heaven? They couldn't even match the righteousness of Pharisees, let alone exceed it!

But then, Jesus explains: It's not enough, for example, not to murder someone (the Pharisees abstained from murder), but they also needed not to hate others (do that, and they could exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees). The problem was that the Pharisees were settling for keeping the letter of the law rather than the spirit of it. To exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees, his hearers needed to actively live the Scriptures. Yes, actually follow Jesus. Do what He did.

And in the examples from our text, actively living the Scriptures meant that doing no harm exceeds the righteousness of the Pharisees. Instead of hitting back, turn the other cheek. Instead of making a big fuss about being forced to go one mile, volunteer to go a second mile. And instead of seeking to hurt your enemies, pray for them. Doing no harm is a great place to start and then move one from there. But the problem is, that we can't even get that one right.

There is a website devoted to the do-no-harm practice (www.donoharm.us/index.html). It makes no claim to be a religious site, but is the work of two men who believe the world would be a better place if we all tried, as a first principle, to do no harm. The opening copy on their website reads:

We seem to be living in a world that is getting less hospitable every day. Look closely at any endeavor our species has engaged in and it appears we are unaware of the harm we do, we ignore the harm we do, we intentionally do harm for our own gain, or sadly in some cases we do harm for our own pleasure and enjoyment.

Has no one taught us to do no harm? If we haven't been taught to do no harm, we see no harm in doing harm. We cause harm and shrug it off. We cause harm and laugh about it. We cause harm and brag about it.

Sadder still, our children bear witness to our actions and never learn to do no harm themselves. Above all else we must teach our children, by example and instruction, this basic moral principle of life.

We must begin to make better choices and treat each other, the other creatures who share this planet with us, and this planet we call home with greater respect and compassion.

We believe that the first and most basic moral law is, "Do no harm." Because we can feel pain and suffering, we can imagine the pain and suffering of others, and we can act accordingly to minimize the harm we cause. [NOTE 5]

Intentionally doing no harm is a vital practice in living a holy life. It is a way of loving our neighbor. And Jesus gives us examples of how it's done — turning the other cheek, loving our enemies, and so on — and models in his own life the returning of good for evil. This is the new ethic of God's world. This is the way people behave in God's world. Paul echoes this in Romans chapter 13 and verses 8 to 10: "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. 9 The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Now listen closely) Verse 10: Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law" and God is Love and Jesus is God.

But there may come those times when we are dealing with a cancerous thing, where we must hasten to help. But some of the time, at a minimum, not making matters worse is a Christian thing to do.

"First, do no harm" may sound unexciting, but it is an aspect of the "ethics of God's world," and it has the power to change the world in a positive way. So how are you going to apply this. What is one way you can intentionally do no harm in the way you live your life? What do you need to avoid doing that you tend to do? How can we follow Jesus better, by practicing submission? Please write something down. Let's pray ...

AMEN

“Sermon Notes for “The Ethics of God’s World (Part 2)”
Based on Matthew 5: 38-48 given in Doster November 26, 2023

- I. Turn the other cheek, give to everyone who begs from you, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, go a second mile with the one who forces you to go the first mile, and to the guy who wants the shirt off your back, give him your coat as well. Doesn’t sound exciting does it? But we are not going for exciting, we want to follow Jesus.
- II. Much of this section of the Sermon on the Mount can be boiled down to “Do No Harm”. That is bedrock Christian behavior. Jesus not only talked about it, He practiced it as well.
- III. Leviticus chapter 19 is mostly about “doing no harm: Do not steal, do not deal falsely, do not lie, do not defraud, do not render false judgments, do not slander, do not take vengeance. Only then do we get to Love Your Neighbor as yourself.
- IV. Starting from the position of doing no harm is related to the spiritual discipline of submission. In Ephesians we read, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Not too long ago I preached on 1 Peter. Chapter 2 verse 13, “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority.” Submission also mentioned in verse 18 and chapter 3 verse 1 and following.
- V. Seeking to intentionally do no harm is a vital practice in living a holy life. So what are you going to do about it? It may not sound exciting, but think about ways you can “do no harm” and follow Jesus. Then write it down.