

Dealing with Adversaries: New Testament Teachings by Word and Deed

by Howard W. Hallman, Chair
Methodists United for Peace with Justice

When we study the New Testament for guidance on how to deal with war and violence, we find very little on political and military strategy. But we discover much about dealing with adversaries. By words and deeds Jesus, his disciples, and the Apostle Paul revealed a twofold approach: (1) love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you and (2) do not retaliate but overcome evil with good.

WORDS

The New Testament draws on two sources for telling us on how to deal with adversaries: (a) the words of Jesus presented in the Gospels and (b) letters of apostles to congregations. In our discussion we are using the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

What Jesus Taught

In the Sermon on the Mount, a set of teachings gathered together by Matthew, Jesus told his disciples and the listening crowd, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer." Turn the other cheek. Give your cloak as well as your coat. Go the second mile. (Mt. 5:38-42) (The Scholars Version of the Bible translates the key phrase as "Don't react violently against the one who is evil." More on this later.)

Jesus also stated, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." (Mt. 5:43-45)

Luke used some of this same material in the Sermon on the Plain. In Luke's version Jesus said, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." Turn the other cheek. Give your shirt as well as your coat. "And as you wish that men would do to you, do so to them." As you love your enemies and do good, "you will be sons of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish." (Lk 6:27-36)

Matthew also included a version of the Golden Rule in the Sermon on the Mount: "So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets." (Mt 7:12)

Later in Jerusalem a lawyer asked Jesus, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Jesus answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.... You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Mt. 22:34-40)

By then Jesus had broadened the concept of neighbor to encompass "enemy". He did this not to abolish the law or the prophets but to fulfill them. (Mt 5:17) His fulfillment came by conveying broader and deeper understanding of God's will. To show that he expected his teachings to be applied, Jesus taught his disciples to pray to God, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." (Mt 6:10)

Words of Apostles

Jesus' teachings were picked up in the writings of apostles. Thus, Paul wrote to the church of the Thessalonians, "See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good." (1 Thess 5:15)

In his letter to the Romans, Paul told them, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them....Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought of what is noble in the sight of all....Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God....No, if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Rom 12:14-21)

The writer of the First Letter of Peter indicated, "Do not return evil for evil or reviling for reviling; but on the contrary bless, for to this you have been called, that you may obtain a blessing." (1 Pt 3:9)

The way the apostles expressed Jesus' teaching helps to clarify what he meant when he said, "Do not resist the evildoer." As noted, Paul wrote, "Do not repay evil for evil" rather "overcome evil with good." First Peter instructed, "Do not return evil for evil." Luke quoted Jesus as saying, "do good to those who hate you."

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus contrasted the old ethic of proportional retaliation ("an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth") with a new ethic of not taking revenge but rather offering positive responses to evildoers. The word "resist" used in the King James and New Revised Standard Versions is an English translation of the Greek word *antistēnai* which in turn is a translation of what Jesus spoke in Aramaic. Walter Wink points out that *antistēnai* is often used elsewhere in the Bible for military encounters such as violent rebellion. He says, therefore, that a proper translation would be: "Don't strike back at one who has done you evil."

DEEDS

The second set of New Testament teachings on how to deal with adversaries occurs in what Jesus, his disciples, and apostles actually did.

Jesus in Action

In his actions Jesus persistently stood up against evil, but he never reacted with violence against evildoers, never took revenge. Instead he forgave his adversaries.

Jesus knew that he would be challenged when he went to Jerusalem. He told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Mt. 16:24)

Being well known and favored by many, Jesus made a triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The next day he entered the temple, overturned the moneychangers' tables, and drove out sheep and cattle. (Mt 21:12-13; Mk 11.19; Lk 19:45-46). The Gospel of John reports that Jesus fashioned a whip of cords but struck no one. (Jn 2:13-17). This was a symbolic gesture, an expression of moral repulsion at the corruption that had taken root in God's holy temple. It showed that Jesus was willing to engage in nonviolent protest. He disrupted the system but did no bodily harm.

Jesus spent several days in verbal encounter with priests, scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees, who tried to entrap him with his words. One of them asked Jesus, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?" He asked to see a coin used to pay the tax. Noticing the emperor's head on the coin, he said, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to the God the things that are God's." (Mt. 22:15-22)

After a final, sacramental meal with his disciples Jesus led them to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. Knowing what lay ahead, he prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." (Mt.26:39)

After a while a large crowd with swords and clubs, sent by the priests and elders and led by Judas the betraying disciple, arrived. One of the disciples drew a sword and cut off the ear of a slave of the chief priest. (The Gospel of John says that it was Peter (Jn 18:10)) Jesus admonished him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword." (Mt. 26: 52) Offering no resistance, Jesus was led away. All of his disciples fled.

Jesus was mocked and tortured, tried by the chief priests and elders, then by Pilate the Roman governor, and condemned to death by crucifixion. The gospel accounts provide different details. Luke reports that on the cross Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." (Lk. 23:34)

In this manner Jesus displayed his commitment to not react against violence with violence and to forgive adversaries. He instructed us by his deeds.

Application by Disciples

The disciples accepted what Jesus taught by word and deed. After the Holy Spirit came to them at Pentecost, they continued Jesus' healing ministry. As apostles, they proclaimed that Jesus had risen from the dead. This annoyed the priests and elders. They had Peter and John arrested. The two disciples offered no resistance and used their opportunity to offer their message to the rulers, elders, and scribes. (Acts 4:1-12)

The apostles continued to preach. The chief priest had them arrested again and put in a public prison. During the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out. (Acts 5:17-19) The temple police found them teaching in the temple. They arrested them, but without violence, and brought them before the council. The high priest told them, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching."

Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority." (Acts 5:29) After some internal debate the high priests had them flogged, again ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The disciples accepted their punishment and continued to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. (Acts 5:40-42).

Things got worse. Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. (Acts 6:8) He was brought before the council. He gave a long sermon that only increased their anger. Some men grabbed Stephen, dragged him out of the city, and began to stone him. Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Before he died, he cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." (Acts 7:57-60)

During the stoning a young man named Saul guarded the coats of the stoners. In this manner he approved their killing of Stephen. (Acts 8:1)

Saul joined the persecution of Jesus' followers, dragging off men and women to prison. (Acts 8:3) He obtained a letter from the high priests to synagogues in Damascus to search for any belonging to the Way so that he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. But on the road he experienced his dramatic conversion. (Acts 9:1-9)

King Herod joined the opposition to the growing church. He had James, the brother of John, killed with a sword. He had Peter arrested and put in prison. An angel of the Lord freed him from his chains and led him out. (Acts 12:1-11)

Throughout all these adversities the disciples maintained their commitment to nonresistance but with a positive attitude. They displayed love for their adversaries, just as Jesus had taught them.

Paul Becomes Practitioner

By then Saul, renamed Paul, was on the road as a missionary of the Lord. He experienced the persecution that he had previously bestowed. He and Barnabas preached to Jews and Gentiles in Antioch and were driven out of town. (Acts 13:48-52) The same thing occurred in Iconium. (14:1-5) Their opponents followed them to Lystra, stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, leaving him for dead. (Acts 14:19)

On a visit to Phillipi Paul and Silas were attacked by a crowd. Magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and beaten with rods. After their severe flogging, they were put in the innermost cell of prison and with their feet fastened in stocks. Paul and Silas prayed and sang hymns to God. (Acts 16:20-25)

In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul recorded, "Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. [by Romans] Once I received a stoning." (2 Cor 11:24-25) In telling of the suffering of the apostles in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote, "When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly." (1 Cor 1:12-13) They put Jesus words into deeds.

Paul, the theologian, wrote to the Romans, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God." (Rom 13:1) But Paul, the apostle, was a frequent practitioner of civil

disobedience by refusing orders of authorities to cease preaching. It seems likely that if pressed Paul would have accepted Peter's assertion, "We must obey God rather than any human authority." He would have recognized that in deciding what is due Caesar and what is due to God, God has a far larger realm to uphold.

Objections

Some critics, however, object to a completely pacifist interpretation of Jesus words and deeds by noting that in Matthew Jesus tells his disciples, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." (Mt. 10:34) This comes in the middle of a long discourse to the disciples as he instructs them for going out to "the lost sheep of Israel" to proclaim the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near. Jesus realized that they would face hardship and suffering and that their message would be divisive. The sword was a symbol of that division, not an instrument for military battle. In fact, Luke in telling this story uses the word "division" rather than sword. (Lk 10:51)

Earlier at the time of baby Jesus' circumcision, Simeon warned Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed...and a sword will pierce your own soul, too." (Lk2:34-35) Again the sword as a symbol.

Likewise the word "sword" is used symbolically in Luke after the last supper before Jesus and the disciples went out to Gethsemane. Jesus reminded them how he had sent them out earlier without purse, bag, or sandals. Now times would be harder. They would need a purse and a bag. "And the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one." They said, "Lord, look, here are two swords." He replied, "It is enough." (Lk 22:35-38) They missed the point, for acquiring a sword was a symbol of preparing for hardship, not acquisition of weaponry. Later when one of them used his sword in Gethsemane, Jesus rebuked him. (Lk 22:51)

Conclusion

We can debate whether Jesus' teaching of non-retaliation, nonviolence, and loving and forgiving one's enemies is applicable in the 21st century in public affairs. But is clear that these practices were central in the life of and teaching of Jesus, his disciples, Paul, and other followers as depicted in the New Testament.

Notes

1. Quotations from Walter Wink are from his *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003. pp. 10-11.

2. A helpful resource for this article was Richard B. Hays, "Violence in Defense of Justice" in *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. San Francisco: Harpers, 1996. pp.317-346.

This article is part of a project on "The Theology of Peace and War". For further information, go to <http://www.mupwj.org/theologyofpeaceandwar.htm>. Or contact Methodists United for Peace with Justice at 1500 16th Street, NW, Washington, D.C.20036 or at mupj@mupwj.org.