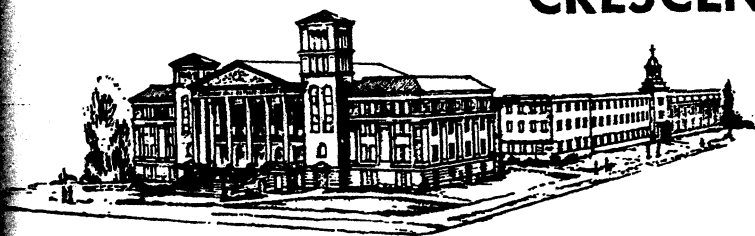


# CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

## SERMONS

"OVERCOMING EVIL WITH GOOD"



Sunday Morning, April 30, 1961  
Crescent Hill Baptist Church  
Louisville, Kentucky  
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There are very few problems in life that can be rightly called "universal." Because of the great difference in temperament and circumstance, what is a problem to some will not be for others. Thus, in the selection of a subject, the preacher realizes he runs the risk of irrelevance for some of his hearers. However, this morning I believe I have found one of those rare "universals," for I want to deal with the problem of settling human differences.

Now even here there will be some variation of degree, for some are prone to controversy, while others find it easy to live in peace. But each of us has some experience with human discord. Ours is an imperfect world, a world where people say and do things that injure one another. Unless you are a hermit, you have some personal associations and thus are bound to be the recipient of unkind words or unfair deeds. And the overall quality of your life is going to be affected by the way that you deal with this tension. In an existence of inevitable conflict, the method of settling personal differences is of immense significance. For once, I feel I am in touch with every person. This is a practical problem for all of us, and this should increase our interest in the answer that is given in the Gospel. Let us concentrate now on how to resolve the discords of human life.

As I look at the moral history of the race, I believe there have been two basic approaches to this problem. One may be called the way of retaliation. It is returning like for like; in colloquial language, it is giving the offender "a dose of his own medicine." In primitive times this took the form of unlimited revenge. If you knocked me down, I might kill you in return. If one of your clan mistreated one of my clan, we might wipe out the whole group. This was a total reaction to any injury; with utter abandon the offended would set out to destroy the offender. Gradually, however, a moral conscience developed, and the principle of equivalent justice began to control revenge. This is the famous "Lex Talionis," by which the reaction to evil is proportioned to the nature of the crime. Thus emerged the familiar statement: "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." This was a definite advance over the more primitive stage, for it said only an eye can be exacted for an eye, and only the offender shall be punished. This principle is found in all the ancient law codes and became the foundation of Roman law and all that followed. Its essence is clear; meet evil on its own terms; give like for like, measure for measure.

The second approach is drastically different. Instead of meeting like with like it suggests the exact opposite: that evil be met with good. This is the way of suffering love. Now it would not be accurate to say that this approach originated with Jesus. The idea had been "in the air" for a long time. You can find it in the teachings of Buddha, in the writings of Plato, and in the example of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. However, it found its clearest expression in the teachings of

Jesus and was incarnated in His life and example. This is perhaps the most famous section of Jesus' teachings. The phrases "turn the other cheek", "give thy cloak also" and "the second mile" are familiar even to unbelievers. These are actually "life situations" that were "loaded" with provocative implications.

The first was an example of insult: "if a man smite you on the right cheek." Since most men are right handed, the only way a face-to-face antagonist could hit the right cheek was with the back of his hand. And everyone knows what "the-back-of-the-hand" means: it is an expression of contempt that constitutes the highest insult. It is an unmistakable invitation to conflict. The second situation was an example of injustice: "if a man sue you for your coat." The Palestinian peasants usually wore only two garments - an inner "coat" and an outer "cloak," and these were his sole protection against the sun by day and the cold by night. To sue a man for a piece of his clothing, especially when he probably had no other, was literally "taking the shirt off his back." This would be an extreme injustice, and the natural reaction would be to become incensed at such inhuman treatment. The third situation was one of indignity: "if a man compel you to go with him one mile." The practice of compelling a citizen started in Persia in relation to their courier system. A messenger was empowered by law to demand anything of a citizen - a horse, food, or actually to carry the message. This technique was adopted by Rome, and used in the conquered territories as a means of subduing the natives. A Roman soldier could draft any Jew to carry his baggage one mile, and the Jew would have to leave his work and do so. This is what happened to Simon of Cyrene as Jesus went to the Cross; he was compelled into service. Naturally, the whole practice was quite an affront to the proud Jews, and every occasion of it stirred up the resentment that much more. Thus, these were graphic, up-to-the-minute situations in the time of Jesus. And everyone knew how one would react under such circumstances. Thus, the solutions He suggested were all the more incredible. Instead of returning evil for evil, they were to endure the indignities and respond in contrast. To the insult of a back-handed slap, they were not to flinch, but offer the left cheek. To the injustice of having their coat taken right off their backs, they were to seize the initiative and offer all their clothes. To the indignities of forced servitude, they were to shock their adversary by going "above and beyond" the call of duty. In the fact of insult, injustice, and indignity, they were to endure in good will and respond in contrast. Then, as if to clinch this approach, Jesus said: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who persecute you, and pray for those that despitefully use you." Here is what might be called the "disjointed" approach of suffering love. In the face of "evil," they were to counter in contrast, returning love to the enemy, good to the hater, blessing to the curser, and prayer to the persecutor.

Here then are the two approaches, and they are diametrically opposed. Evil occurs, and one meets it with an equivalent evil, the other with an enduring love. But what about the two; which of them works in actual practice? Well, the verdict of history would be that one is realistic and the other impractical. These words of Jesus have been praised for their beauty and lofty idealism, but set aside as hopelessly impossible in our kind of world. And if the truth were known, I imagine you share this same opinion. We admire the sentiment behind the words, but we cannot believe that it would "work."

This morning I want to make an emphatic protest against the majority opinion, and call for a complete reversal of the verdict. I think the exact opposite is true: that Jesus is a realist and the way of retaliation is an illusion.

If you will examine the matter carefully, you will find that revenge never solves a difference, it only intensifies it. When the prophet Buddha observed that returning evil for evil made the wheel of suffering to revolve faster, he was expressing an obvious truth. When you injure me and I respond in kind, nothing has been resolved. Rather, a sullen dislike is born that will seek new ways of expressing itself. Evil can never overcome evil. The law of addition is the law of increase, and the simple logic of arithmetic says that evil added to evil means more evil. The truth of this is so clear that it need not be emphasized. Yet I know of no point where we have been more blind to the obvious and ignorant of what history teaches. Contrary to the old adage, revenge is not sweet; it is bitter. It only speeds up the vicious cycle of evil that has never yet resolved a difference.

I can think of numerous illustrations of this pointless circle of revenge. I worked one summer in a little town in western North Carolina. One night I heard a gunshot - saw a big commotion, and ran out to find that a young man had been shot down in cold blood right on the main street. I asked about the background, and it turned out to be the age-old story of a growing feud. It all started about a year before in a minor car accident. "Bad blood" was born then, and the two swapped revenge and grew steadily more bitter. One spiked the other in a baseball game, they had a fist-fight, one burned down the other's garage. And it finally ended there on Main Street. Here was one man dead, another facing life imprisonment, and nothing had been settled. Thus to call this approach "realistic" is sheer illusion. It simply does not work in solving the problems of human difference.

On the other hand, the so-called "idealistic way" is, in fact, pure realism, for it gets at the source of the trouble. The other simply fights on the periphery; it bogs down in the realm of effects, and never approaches the cause. The approach of suffering love goes right to the heart of the matter. It digs beneath the surface and aims at changing the will that is responsible for it all. This is far more realistic, and holds much more promise of ultimate solution than mere retaliation. Let me ask you something. If my neighbor has a barking dog who keeps me awake at night, which approach would be more "realistic": to get me a barking dog and match him sound for sound; or to teach my neighbor's dog to sleep all night? The answer is obvious. The only "realistic" approach is to deal with the basic cause. And this is precisely what the way of Jesus does.

It attacks the problem both passively and actively. The first phase is refusing to fight back. C.A. Scott paraphrases this injunction: "Don't let evil pull you into the ring." By so doing, you short-circuit the endless cycle of evil returned for evil, and you also expose the evil for what it is. By refusing to add fuel to the flame, you isolate the evil and let its true nature be seen. The original issue is not clouded, and evil shows its true face. If I hit you without cause, this is wrong. However, if you hit me back, I forget the original wrong and now have a reason to hit you a second time-you hit me. Thus as we stand there trading blows, the original issue is lost. Your protest against my evil is weakened because you have done the same thing. On the other hand, if you refuse to fight back, each blow becomes more and more wrong, and pretty soon I have to face what I am doing. It is hard to continue a fight when the other man will not fight back. Evil needs reinforcement to keep going, and when you refuse additional provocation, it has a way of dissipating itself. Refusing to fight back is not the act of a coward; it is the act of a strong man who realizes it will serve no purpose and seeks rather to overcome with goodness.

The second part is active. In response to evil, some good deed is returned. Paul calls this "heaping coals of fire on one's head." He means this will evoke a response, and surely it will. For just as one cannot long tolerate the feeling of burning coals, neither can he bear the sight of invincible good will. Such action exerts a tremendous moral pressure. To receive good in return for evil is most devastating, and comes closer to changing inner attitudes than anything else I know. This is the basic dynamic of the Gospel: the sight of suffering love breaks and transforms the heart.

This truth is wonderfully illustrated by an incident in the novel Stars in My Crown. It seems there was an old colored man - an Uncle Remus type - that everybody knew and loved devotedly. He had been a friend to several generations of boys, teaching them to hunt and fish and all such things. He owned a little farm on which was found a rich deposit of ore, but since he was old and it was home, he did not want to sell. This infuriated several townsmen, for they wanted the place so they could "make a killing." When the old Negro continued to refuse, they resorted to all kinds of violence and destruction, trying to scare him off. Nothing worked, so they finally sent a note saying that if he was not off by sundown, a group of hooded mobsters would come and hang him. The preacher "got wind" of this, and went out to be there that night. When the mob arrived, he and the old Negro came out, and the preacher said that since he was going to die, the old man had written his will and wanted it read. The preacher began reading: The farm went to the town banker who had organized the mob, his bird dog to one whom he had taught to hunt, his rifle to another boy he had loved - and on and on, remembering with kindness the very men who now were ready to kill him. It had a startling effect: one by one the mob scattered, till they were all gone. Then the preacher dropped the paper and turned to go inside. His grandson, who had been watching from afar, picked it up and saw it was blank. He said, "This isn't a will, Grandfather." The preacher answered, "Yes it is, son; the will of God." Good in the face of evil is the one thing that can solve the problem.

Therefore, this morning, in what I deem to be a universal problem, let me point you to the way of suffering love as the only "realistic" solution. The best way to overcome an enemy is to change him into a friend. This you cannot do by retaliation, but you can by returning good. Responding in kind is being overcome by evil: responding in love is overcoming evil with good!

"Depart now in the fellowship of God the Father, and as you go, remember: in the goodness of God you were born into this world; by the grace of God you have been kept all the day long, even unto this hour, and by the love of God, fully revealed in the face of Jesus, you are being redeemed."