



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Violent Parables and the Nonviolent Jesus
(*Parables*, pp. 27-36)

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Christian Reflection

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Violent Parables and the Nonviolent Jesus

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?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Matthew 13:36-43, 13:47-50, and 18:23-35

Responsive Reading: Matthew 5:43-48

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 rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

All: Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Reflection

Jesus teaches us to love others, even our enemies, because this is how God acts. "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," Barbara Reid writes. "It invites the estranged one away from enmity into the path of forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation."

Yet the portrayal of God in eight parables in Matthew clashes with Jesus' explicit teachings about peacemaking and his nonviolent responses to violence. Reid evaluates seven ways that we might interpret these violent parables.

- ▶ *Matthew misunderstood Jesus.* Maybe the evangelist missed the point about God's boundless love and put wrongheaded words into Jesus' mouth. However, not only does this view undermine Matthew's trustworthiness, it also fails to explain why other Gospels have violent parables (cf. Luke 19:27).
- ▶ *Jesus did not teach nonviolence.* Yet this is hard to accept, for we have no stories of Jesus retaliating against those who harm him. Moreover, how could we explain why early Christians, by the second century, embraced a "love of enemies" ethic?
- ▶ *Matthew weaves together conflicting views of God*—one says God is gracious to the unrighteous; another says God violently punishes them. But this is puzzling: which do we emulate?
- ▶ *Matthew gives advanced and basic instruction*—to mature disciples he teaches peacemaking, but to the immature he offers frightening parables of punishment. But he does not flag these teachings



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as higher and lower. So, why should we “progress toward love of enemies, and not go in the reverse direction—that is, resort to violence if love does not work?”

- ▶ *These parables are not about God.* Perhaps “the powerful males in the parables are not meant to be metaphors for God.” But Matthew explicitly identifies them in 13:37 and 18:35.
- ▶ *These parables describe the end-time, not our time.* Jesus’ nonviolence does not apply to the final judgment, but to how we face evildoers “to convert them and to safe guard against becoming an evildoer oneself by not imitating the violence of the aggressor.” The parables, in contrast, use symbols for “the dire consequences of not becoming a disciple.”
- ▶ *At the end-time, evildoers bring violence on themselves.* God does not become “vindictive and violent,” 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 a victim of this violence themselves.”

“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,” Reid concludes. “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.”

Study Questions

1. According to Reid, what nonviolent responses to violence are modeled by Jesus and others in the Gospel of Matthew? Is it correct to speak of “the nonviolent Jesus” in this Gospel?
2. How would you summarize Jesus’ teaching on nonviolence in the Sermon on the Mount? Does he give specific guidance for action, describe a character trait we should have, or both?
3. In the parables in Matthew, how does God deal violently with evildoers?
4. Do you agree with Reid’s evaluation of the seven options for interpreting the violent parables? Do you know a better way?
5. In today’s violent world, what is the danger of interpreting God as punishing evildoers (even in the end-time)? Should we play down these parables and focus instead on God’s gracious love for everyone?

Departing Hymn: “God of All Power, and Truth, and Grace” (verses 1, 5, and 4)

God of all power, and truth, and grace
that shall from age to age endure,
whose Word, when heaven and earth shall pass,
remains and stands for ever sure;

O take this heart of stone away!
Your sway it does not, cannot own;
in me no longer let it stay,
O take away this heart of stone!

Give me a new, a perfect heart,
from doubt, and fear, and sorrow free;
the mind that was in Christ impart,
and let my spirit cleave to Thee.

Charles Wesley (1742), alt.
Tune: MARYTON

Violent Parables and the Nonviolent Jesus

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Matthew 5:11-12, 38-48; 6:13	Matthew 13:36-43; 13:47-50; and 18:23-35
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading		Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss Jesus' teachings and example of nonviolence	Discuss the violent parables in Matthew
Questions 3, 4, and 5	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 2	Questions 3, 4, and 5
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To review Jesus' teaching on nonviolence and peacemaking in the Sermon on the Mount.
2. To consider Jesus' eight parables in Matthew in which God deals violently with evildoers.
3. To examine how the violence in these parables should be interpreted in light of Jesus' life and teachings.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Parables (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "God of All Power, and Truth, and Grace" locate the familiar tune MARY-TON in your church's hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

On September 11, 2001, Barbara Reid was leading a study tour on the West Bank. "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 all too quickly shift into retaliation, vengeance, and violent warfare" (*Parables*, 27).

Her story reminds us that how we interpret the violence in Jesus' parables has important consequences for how we respond to evildoers and share the gospel in today's violent world.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to give the group discernment as you prayerfully study the violent parables by the nonviolent Jesus.

Scripture Reading

Ask three group members to read Matthew 13:36-43, 13:47-50, and 18:23-35 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

This discussion of eight violent parables in Matthew is one of three study guides on the key themes in Jesus' parables in the synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The companion studies are "Hearing is Believing" (Mark) and "Hazmats or Good Gifts?" (Luke). Of the Matthean parables with violent endings, Barbara Reid notes that four "are unique to Matthew: the Weeds and the Wheat (13:24-30, 36-43), 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.”

You might extend this discussion to two sessions. In one, review Jesus’ teachings on peacemaking in the Sermon on the Mount and his nonviolence response to his enemies. In the other session, discuss how to interpret the violent endings of the eight parables in Matthew.

Study Questions

1. Reid identifies seven nonviolent responses to violence in the Gospel of Matthew: *avoidance or flight* as when Jesus’ family escapes Herod and Archelaus (2:13-15, 19-23), or when Jesus tells disciples to flee persecution (10:23); *rejoicing over persecution* (5:11-12); *supplication for deliverance* from evil (6:13); and responding to violence with *nonretaliation, nonviolent confrontation, love of enemies, and prayer for persecutors* (5:38-48).
2. Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, including the instructions on nonviolence, are the fulfillment and right interpretation of the Law, not its abolition (Matthew 5:17). Reid groups Jesus’ instruction under six headings: *rejoicing over persecution* (5:11-12), *supplication for deliverance* from evil (6:13), and responding to violence with *nonretaliation, nonviolent confrontation, love of enemies, and prayer for persecutors* (5:38-48). “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,” says Reid. “What it does not provide is a ready-made solution for all occasions.”
3. Assign individuals or groups to review the violent endings in the Weeds and the Wheat (13:40-42), the Dragnet (13:49-50), Forgiveness Aborted (18:34-35), Treacherous Tenants (21:41, 43-44), the Wedding Feast (22:11-13), Faithful Servants (24:51), the Talents (25:30), and the Final Judgment (25:41). Reid summarizes: “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.”
4. Consider how Reid evaluates the seven options with a high view of Scripture. She wants to preserve Jesus’ teachings on nonviolence and Matthew’s reliability as an evangelist. She seems to reject the “two-level” solution – i.e., different teachings for mature and immature disciples – because it requires an extra-biblical way of deciding what counts as “mature.” She favors the seventh option because it is suggested by the relationship between the unforgiving slave and the generous master in the Parable of Forgiveness Aborted (18:23-35).
5. “Disciples can easily hear an assurance that they belong to the saved while others who they perceive as evildoers are condemned,” Reid warns. “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.... 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.” Are people in danger of adopting this attitude in the “war on terror”? Is playing down God’s final punishment of evildoers our only option? Members might discuss the Apostle Paul’s alternative stance – that God is responsible for final retribution and we are not (see Romans 12:19-21) – which takes divine punishment seriously.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.