

**“But I Say to You...”  
By Adam Fronczek**

In one of this year’s Super Bowl commercials, LeBron James tells the audience all the reasons why he *could* tell you to drink Sprite...but he keeps insisting he’s not going to tell you to drink it...and at the end of the commercial he instead asks a question: “Do you want a Sprite?” I’m sure I don’t have to say out loud in this consumer product town what the point is: sometimes it’s more persuasive to give people a choice rather than telling them what to do.

That’s an important principle to keep in mind as we get into today’s Scripture lesson. Jesus tells his disciples:

“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. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you...”

“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...’”

Most Christians are relieved when they hear that these words may not need to be taken too seriously. Throughout time, biblical scholars have provided plenty of examples of ways that we might adapt these difficult commands to something we can manage. A few examples:

Some say the commands expressed here are aspirational—they speak to a kind of living to which Jesus called his disciples, but none of them were able to live according to that vision; they were human beings, just like we are. Jesus gives us something to strive for in the hopes that we will make some progress toward it.

If you follow that line of reasoning, it leads to another healthy idea: accepting that you will fail in following difficult commands is helpful in our faith; acknowledging our failures reminds us of our human fallibility and our need for grace, and that kind of humility helps us to trust God more.

Another explanation says that these words of Jesus are mandates to individual people, not everyone; also, some argue that they were spoken in a simpler time than ours, and in our modern and complex global economy they just don’t apply in quite the same way—that’s another way to cope with these tough commands.

Still others have argued that the historical context is essential to adapting the message to our time. Many discerning readers love an article written on this passage a few decades ago by theologian named Walter Wink. He argued that all of these commands need to be heard in the context of the Roman occupation of Israel. Turning the other cheek, and offering a coat as well as one's cloak...these were both acts of nonviolent resistance. They would have been embarrassing to the oppressor—the one striking the blow or suing you for your cloak could be ridiculed or even punished for abusing you more than you deserve. There is a similar argument concerning going the second mile. Roman soldiers were permitted to force a subject of the Empire to carry their pack for one mile, but the voluntary act of carrying the pack a second mile was illegal and might subject the Roman soldier to punishment. So Jesus is recommending acts of resistance, says Walter Wink. These are strategic protests against the injustices for the day. This is in no way a doormat mentality and Jesus is no pushover—and you don't need to be either.

What a relief. Thank goodness we have so many intelligent ways to read difficult texts such as this one. Biblical scholars are responsible for all of these readings, and they are a relief to me both personally as a Christian and also as a minister who is supposed to interpret the texts for all of you.

And then I read another interpretation—one that calls all of the others into question.

A scholar had considered all of these explanations, and then one day his 10-year-old daughter read Matthew 5 and asked her father, "Dad, isn't Jesus just wrong about this?" And his daughter's question forced him to consider that these other interpretations all share the same problem—they all suggest that on some level, Jesus must be wrong.

"Matthew's Gospel as a whole, and the Sermon on the Mount in particular [in which this teaching is found], repeatedly insist that Jesus means exactly what he says." (Carey, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, 383) So the question remains, "is Jesus wrong?" And whether he's wrong or not, why are we trying so hard to explain Jesus away?

I think it's helpful to acknowledge that this is an extremely difficult text, and that applying it faithfully requires some legitimate struggle. Here's an example of struggling faithfully with the text.

It's Black History Month, and during this month we celebrate many things about the contributions of African Americans to our shared history and way of life. The Civil Rights Movement and its focus on nonviolent resistance was largely the product of church leaders who studied these words of Jesus and took them seriously. They refused to explain away the words of Jesus. They were often critical of the church's lack of faithfulness to those words, and many of the movement's most faithful participants were moved by something other than Jesus. But they all took his words seriously. "Turn the other cheek, give your cloak as well, go the second mile; love your enemies and

pray for those who persecute you.” People who believed in the truth of these words and refused to compromise on their integrity brought a new level of justice to America. They did it through following Jesus’ instructions and they suffered for it; and they followed in the face of firehoses, and dogs, and billy clubs.

Interestingly, leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, while they took some of Jesus’ commands quite literally, chose not to listen to others. Jesus begins the whole passage with his declaration “do not resist an evildoer.” And the Civil Rights Movement was absolutely resistance, it was nonviolent resistance to evildoers. My hunch is that faithful Christians chose to resist evil because they had other resources at hand besides these words of Jesus. They read the whole Bible and so they knew the words of the Prophet Amos: “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream...” (Amos 5:24) They knew how awful and unjust their current situation was; but they changed the world because they were people of vision. They could imagine a better life because they knew the story of Moses who prompted Dr. King to say, “I’ve been to the mountaintop...and I’ve looked over...and I’ve seen the promised land...” (King, “Unfulfilled Dreams,” April 3, 1968) Outside of Scripture, they had other resources from other traditions. Dr. King learned about nonviolent resistance not by studying Jesus but by studying Gandhi. Nonviolent resistance is built by an assessment of injustice, attempts at negotiation, self-purification, followed finally by direct action (Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 189). All of this wisdom from the Bible and other traditions as well came together for the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement and led them to live their faith in a way that mattered. They may not have applied every one of Jesus’ words in their own context; but they took Jesus seriously—for they knew that Jesus means what he says. This is a faithful struggle with the words of Jesus.

All of us, if we are to faithfully apply the words of Jesus to our lives, need something to help us reconcile Jesus’ hard commands with the realities of our world. And I believe that the answer is not an easy one, but it comes in the way Jesus delivers the message. Each time Jesus gives a command, he says it this way, “you have heard it said, but I say to you...” (Essex, *Feasting on the Word, Year A*, 384) This statement is a reminder to us that we are not just given a command, we are invited to think about what it means. The burden is upon us to decide how seriously we will take Jesus. Jesus’ words are as radical as you allow them to be. If you decide that his words are really intended to change your life, your life can be transformed by what you hear in the Bible. On the other hand, if you choose to make Jesus’ words as unthreatening as possible; if you smooth them out until they conform to all of the assumptions you already make about life, well, you can do that, too—and your life will be unchanged. I think Jesus gives us the toughest of commands beginning with the words “But I say to you...” because Jesus knows that given a choice, most of us will choose to live in a world that is better and more compassionate, more peaceful and more kind than that to which most of us have become accustomed. Given a chance to live a better life, most of us will take it.

Speaking of the Civil Rights Movement—work is far from over—I am reminded today that it’s an interesting time to be a minister because of the variety of strong desires that exist among all of you concerning politics. Some of you cannot believe I

haven't been saying more about politics, and others would prefer that I say less. Some don't understand why so many people are protesting—offering acts of “resistance,” as today's sermon acknowledges. Others among you have participated in those acts of resistance. And out there in our culture on both the right and on the left there are acts of resistance against conventional authorities, and on both the right and the left some of those acts are being carried out thoughtfully; and some of those acts of resistance are being carried out with verbal and physical violence.

When I look at the history of the Civil Rights Movement and its interpretation of the Scripture before us today, I see a story of faithful people who struggled with the words of Jesus, and who applied them thoughtfully and prayerfully. They thought seriously about Jesus' commands; they disagreed with Jesus at times, but most importantly, they took him seriously. Rather than looking for a way to smooth out his words in an effort to make them more convenient, they listened to him, and strove to be his disciples, even when doing so was hard.

Friends, we too are living in the midst of times that demand thoughtfulness and also courage. Courage to disagree and to do so respectfully and productively. Courage to think, rather than blindly following the first idea that meets with our approval. Courage to be curious about people who are different from us, knowing that curiosity need not challenge our integrity. Courage to love our enemy, and to take that word “enemy” seriously--for there are enemies. But the person who simply voted differently from you is not necessarily your enemy. We need courage to restore the standards of our dialogue and the love with which we speak to one another. Perhaps most of all, we need courage to be compassionate and kind, especially toward those who are the most vulnerable, for whom political difference is not an academic issue or a dinner party argument, but a matter of life and death. Jesus told us to love one another as he loved us, and he is the one who loved us so much he gave his own life away. We need to follow Jesus faithfully and take him seriously, and not be too eager to explain him away.

You have heard it said that these commands may not be so hard, but I say to you, *Jesus says what he means*. These commands are challenging, but the Christian life must include such challenges. The great theologian Paul Tillich wrote about how “Grace...strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual.” (Tillich, “You Are Accepted”) When we face hard times and allow Jesus' words to confront and challenge us and cause us to grow, that is perhaps when we receive the greatest gifts of faith.

Amen.