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## Accents & Issues

# Violence

Violence is epidemic in our world — murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, and burglary. Even more alarming is the violence in the home — abuse of children, spouses, and even parents.

Violence has always been with us. In the book of Genesis, after Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate of the fruit, immediately, human relationships began to deteriorate. Not long after the fall came the first recorded murder. Cain, realizing his brother Abel's sacrifice was more pleasing to God, killed his brother in a fit of jealous rage. Cain's great-great-grandson Lamech boasted of his prowess in massive acts of violence.

In response, God gave Moses the principle of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” — the principle of proportionality — not a life for an eye or mutilation for a tooth. The law of Moses was God's first step in dealing with violence by insisting on justice, which does not eliminate violence, but does curb it.

Jesus' directive for dealing with violence is the following: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person” (Matt. 5:38-39). Jesus also says: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:43, 44).

Jesus raised humankind's strategies for dealing with violence to a whole new level. No longer are his followers to respond to enemy violence with justice, which emphasizes proportional retaliation, but with love. Jesus reveals that God's ultimate will for dealing with violence is not retaliation, but reconciliation.

Jesus rejects violence as a realistic means to reconciliation for at least two reasons. First, Jesus plainly stated, “All who draw the sword will die by the sword” (Matt. 26:52). The law of continuity is at work: Fire produces more fire; hate produces more hate; violence fosters more violence. Second, violence is an attack against the person and does not deal with such underlying problems as fear, hate, and poverty. Violence is not the answer to personal, political, or social problems. Instead, a violent response is likely to escalate the level of violence. Moreover, violence clouds understanding and, therefore, eliminates reconciliation.

Loving one's enemies, turning the other cheek, and accepting persecution are honorable ideals but viewed as impractical and unrealistic in a fallen world governed by evil. People ask, “What would you do if someone was breaking into your house or attempting to rape your wife or about to kill your grandmother?” implying that violence is the only reasonable response.

This assumption reveals a poverty of imagination. Many possible responses are nonviolent. Physical restraint, giving what the person is asking for, or a loving response are more likely to disarm the attacker than violence. Indeed, Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and countless Anabaptist martyrs illustrated the power of a nonviolent response to evil. Moreover, the follower of Jesus can take precautions to avoid violence by locking doors, avoiding dangerous situations, or running away. Abuse victims can seek professional help or move to a shelter as a first step toward rehabilitation for both the abuser and the abused.

Even for noble causes, like Peter protecting Jesus on the night of his arrest, our Lord rejects violence. Jesus' nonviolent love is not passivity but strength that conquers evil. Jesus' goal is to overcome evil with love. To kill one's enemy is to take away any possibility of repentance and conversion. The ultimate testimony of Jesus' love was to treat an aggressor as a human being, capable of a moral and spiritual transformation. The Bible calls us

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to act toward our enemies as Jesus did toward his. We were once Jesus' enemies but are now recipients of his transforming love.

Perhaps at no other time is our faithfulness to Jesus tested as severely as when called upon to love an enemy. Belief that our lives are in the hands of a risen Savior and that death (perhaps our violent death) has been overcome on the cross means we can follow Jesus as he calls us to love our enemies, which may cost us as much as it did Jesus.

