

Matthew 5:43-48

"Who Are the Bad Guys?"

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This morning when I left for church with the boys, I left behind a house full of bad guys. We have most of the notable ones in our house - Darth Vader, Megatron, the Joker, the Green Goblin, and countless others. Most of them are small action figures that populate the lower shelves of the boys' room, but they do tend to migrate throughout the house. Just the other day Alex found one underneath our sofa, and held it up to me triumphantly, exclaiming, "bad guy!". I think it happened to be Batman, but to Alex they are all "bad guys". He's learned that phrase from his big brother, who has the active imagination of a four year-old and lives in a world continually defined by the struggle between "good guys" and "bad guys". Sometimes it's hard to tell who's who.

As a father, I've been fascinated by my sons' interest in "bad guys", and it seems to be very much a part of who they are as little boys. There seems to be an almost universal process through which little boys work through their interest in power and aggression, and I'd wager that I'm not the first parent who's ever been asked, "Daddy, what are guns for?" or "Daddy, is fighting okay if we're fighting mean people?" or "Daddy, who are the bad guys?" From a very early age (at least in my house) we have questions about power, and retaliation, and the use of force in response to bad things, and as we age we seem to settle into a certain acceptance of these things. We understand that sometimes lethal power or even violent force is necessary in certain situations, and in those situations, more often than not the ends are what justify the means.

In the movie *The Untouchables*, there's a well-known scene in which a former Chicago cop, Jim Malone is speaking with Elliott Ness. Ness has taken on the monumental task of putting notorious Chicago gangster Al Capone behind bars, but as he quickly finds out, it's not as simple as strolling up to Capone and arresting him. Malone counsels Ness, saying, "You want to get Capone? Do you really wanna get him?"

"I want to get Capone!" Ness replies. "I just don't know how to do it." Malone looks at him intently and tells him, "You wanna know how to get Capone? They pull a knife, you pull a gun. He sends one of yours to the hospital, you send one of his to the morgue. *That's the Chicago way!* And that's how you get Capone. Now do you want to do that? Are you ready to do that?"

"I have sworn to capture this man with all the powers at my disposal, and I will do so," Ness says.

"Good," Malone says back, "because the Lord hates a coward."

Malone's advice to Ness isn't so strange in this day and age. Sometimes you have to get the bad guys before they get you. Sometimes you have to get the bad guys before they can carry out their plans. Sometimes you have to get the bad guys, because... well, because punishing the bad guys is what the good

guys always do. Just ask my four year-old son. He knows how important it is to get the bad guys!

Eventually, however, he is going to hear the gospel in a way that challenges his notion of how we relate to the bad guys. He's going to hear the words of Jesus that we heard this morning in our New Testament reading: *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.* These were incredibly challenging words of Jesus' audience, which was used to a law that said, "An eye for an eye," and "a tooth for a tooth." The punishment should fit the crime. Those are incredibly challenging words for us to hear as well! Those words have been shaking people up since the day Jesus first said them. How are we to put such a difficult teaching into practice? How do they even make sense in a world filled with bad guys who must be gotten before they get you? I confess that there may not be any easy answers.

I think it's helpful to realize, however, that Jesus offered his teaching to people who weren't altogether different than we are today with respect to power, and retaliation, and the use of force. Jesus was a Jew, and he spoke to crowds of Jews who cried out for their Messiah to deliver them. When they spoke of their long-expected Messiah, they claimed that he would be a great military leader, maybe a mighty war general who would not only liberate and deliver them, but also punish the enemies who oppressed them and held them captive. This is what they expected of their Messiah. Incidentally, you can see a glimpse of this expectation in some of the Psalms. Psalm 139, for instance, reads:

O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me— those who speak of you maliciously, and lift themselves up against you for evil! Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.

God was to come along and punish the enemies and deliver the faithful to freedom. There may not seem like there's anything wrong with that, and in fact, the words of Psalm 139 fit right into our tendencies to want to get those bad guys, our preconceived notions that "the Lord hates a coward". The only problem is that when God's Messiah actually *did* come to deliver and redeem God's people, he was a poor carpenter's son who seemed not at all concerned with punishing people. He was far more fond of saying things like, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone," and "Daughter, your sins are forgiven." He eventually would be crucified on a cross between two criminals. In other words, he wasn't at all what people were expecting. Jesus exercised power through humility, and compassion, and servitude, and he was anything but cowardly. It turns out that once Jesus, the Messiah, walked upon the scene, it became clear that the expectations that God would show up and punish the

bad guys and redeem the good guys were based on a misunderstanding of who God is.

Tom Wright tells the story of a father who had to go away from his young family for a few days on business. He was anxious about how things would go in his absence, so he had a word with his oldest son, who was nine at the time. "When I'm away," he said, "I want you to think what I would normally do around the house, and you do it for me." The father had in mind, of course, things like keeping the house clean, washing the dishes, taking out the trash, and helping the mother out with anything she needed done. When the father returned from his trip, he asked his wife what the son had done. "Well," she said, "it was very strange. Right after breakfast he made himself another cup of coffee, went into the living room, turned the music up, and read the newspaper for half an hour. After that he scolded his sister for not picking up her toys." It seems the son fundamentally misunderstood who his father was.

There are undoubtedly times when we misunderstand who our Father is, and we misunderstand what God has asked us to do. We make the mistake of thinking that God relates to the world the way that we relate to each other, punishing evildoers and hating those who do wrong things. This is a very easy mistake to make, as we live in a world culture dominated by the exercise of power. We also have a tendency to assume that the "bad guys" are always "out there" in the world somewhere rather than wherever we are. If we are honest with ourselves, we'll come to terms with scripture's very clear assessment of human nature, which tells us that we have all sinned and fallen short of glory of God, and we stand in need of God's grace, and love, and forgiveness. Sometimes we realize, in the words of Walt Kelly's comic character *Pogo*, "We have seen the enemy, and he is us." The good news we celebrate today, however, is that we have also seen the Savior, the Lord's Messiah, and he forgives us. All he expects in return is for us to show the same love to others who are flawed, and imperfect, and sinful, and share the good news of our forgiveness with others who need it.

"I say to you," Jesus said, "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."

What Jesus is teaching here is not a foreign policy for when your country is threatened, nor is it a prescription for how to behave when your family is endangered by violence. What he's teaching here is a whole new way of thinking about God and about other people. In Jesus' day as well as our own, religion was expressed and practiced by following strict rules, and obeying hundreds of prohibitions. Jesus shows us that God wants more of us than that. God wants a love and compassion that is more than following simple rules. God wants people who love justice, who extend compassion and a helping hand to those in need. God wants people who don't automatically respond to violence with more violence, or hurt with more hurt. God wants active love, people who don't exclude or shut out or walk away from anyone. God wants responsible people who think and act creatively and lovingly,

especially in those situations for which there is no simple law or rule. God wants more from us than memorizing and obeying laws and avoiding wrongdoings and sin, as if God is some head principal in the sky who constantly updates our permanent records with every transgression that we commit. That's not who God is! And that's not who we are called to be, either! God calls us to be responsible, imaginative people who know the rules and struggle as faithfully as we can to understand and follow their spirit and intent. Jesus said that the entire law can be summed up in one commandment: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as you love yourself.

That means that we live our lives as closely as we can to the perfection of God's love for the world. It means proclaiming that God alone is sovereign, Lord of all creation, and all that goes on here on earth. It means proclaiming with our words and actions that God's justice is tempered by God's love for all people. It means living our lives based on who God is, announcing the good news: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life.* It means praying for the strength to love others because God loves them, even if they are called our enemies and mean to hurt or kill us, or simply insult us and threaten our faith.

I once read a parable about a holy man who was practicing his morning meditation under a tree whose roots stretched out over the riverbank. During his meditation he noticed that the river was rising, and a scorpion caught in the roots was about to drown. He crawled out on the roots and reached down to free the scorpion, but every time he did so, the scorpion struck back at him, trying to sting him. A man passing by stopped and said to the holy man, "Don't you know that's a scorpion, and it's in the nature of a scorpion to want to sting?" The holy man replied, "That may well be, but it is my nature to love and to save, and I will not let the scorpion's desire to hurt change my desire to help." Remember, brothers and sisters, that it is in our Lord's nature to love and to save.

Thanks be to God. Amen.