



## Article

# *Matthew's Fifth Antithesis and Domestic Violence*

by Michael J. Brennan, O.Praem.<sup>1</sup>

It has been two thousand years since God became incarnate and walked among us in first-century Palestine as Jesus, son of Mary and Joseph. Despite all the differences between then and now, we remain human beings who are both graced by the love of God and wounded by sin and human tragedy. Perhaps one of the most common denominators between the daily life of first-century Palestine and the daily life of today is the prevalence of violence. Thomas Neufeld writes about first-century Palestine, "It is not an exaggeration to say that violence pervaded the world of Jesus and his followers...the landowners, slaveholders, centurions, suspicious and judgmental religious leaders, local kings and Roman overlords...represent those in charge of maintaining an order soaked in violence..."<sup>2</sup> We continue to live in a world that is soaked in violence; a world where terrorism and hate crimes plague places like Orlando, Istanbul, Nice, and Aleppo. Our country is strained by the violent rhetoric of political divisiveness and the shooting deaths of men and women on our city streets. And these are just a sampling of the incidents that attract major headlines; much of the violence that occurs does not ever enter into the public consciousness. One of the types of violence that lurks below the surface is violence that occurs within the home. It is to this world of yesteryear and today, a world soaked in violence, that Jesus addresses his Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7). In this article, I offer a socio-rhetorical analysis of Jesus's fifth antithesis (5:38-42), which seeks to break cycles of violence and can be read as an exhortation to church leaders of today to understand and speak out against domestic violence.

### Overview of Antitheses

As with all biblical passages, it is important to understand the immediate context of the pericope. Matthew's fifth antithesis is addressed to his disciples and the crowds (5:1) as part of the Sermon on the Mount and begins, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil" (5:38-39, NABRE). Each of the six antitheses begins with this or similar formula: "You have heard that it was said...But I say to you..." (5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44). An immediate (and wrong) reading of this formula is that Jesus is superseding the Law as given to the People of Israel throughout the Old Testament. Immediately before the first antithesis, the Matthean Jesus speaks these words: "I have come not to abolish but to fulfill...Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of the commandments and teaches others to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever obeys and teaches these commandments will be called greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (5:17, 19). Barbara Reid explains, "These verses clearly set forth

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2 Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *Killing Enmity: Violence and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 9.

Jesus' relationship to the Law. He is a thoroughly observant Jew who is devoted to keeping the Law. He does not replace the Law, nor does he break it; rather, he fulfills it, bringing it to its intended purpose. He is the authentic interpreter of the Law for a changed situation."<sup>3</sup>

With Mt 5:17-20 and Reid's commentary in mind, it is most appropriate to read the antitheses as consistent with Matthew's presentation of the life, words, and ministry of Jesus as the authoritative interpretation of the Law. Daniel Harrington elaborates, "Matthew's task was to show that Jesus (and his followers), far from being an enemy of Torah, fulfilled it in his teaching and action, and thus gave to it the appropriate interpretation for the changed situation of Judaism...The dynamic of the antitheses is one of sharpening the Torah, getting to the root of what each teaches..."<sup>4</sup> At the root of the fifth antithesis is the principle of *lex talionis*, "This 'eye for eye' form of law [which] provides the foundation for legal ethics [of the Torah] by making the punishment commensurate with the offense...each person must recognize that another person's life and members were worth no less than one's own...the *lex talionis* regulations primarily avenged the person's honor, vindicating the person by punishing the assailant."<sup>5</sup> To properly understand how Jesus attempts to emphasize the root message of principle of *lex talionis*, which aims to break the cycles of violence, it is necessary to consider the primary Old Testament and Early Judaism *lex talionis* texts.

### ***Lex Talionis* in the Old Testament and Early Judaism**

In the next several paragraphs, I will examine how the principle of *lex talionis* is presented in the Old Testament and Early Judaism and how this informs the understanding of Jesus's message regarding this principle. The primary Old Testament *lex talionis* texts to be considered are Ex 21:23-25, Lv 24:19-20, and Dt 19:21. Naturally, each of these texts has a particular context and audience.

Exodus 21:23-25 reads, "But if injury ensues, you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe." This pericope is located within the covenant code (Ex 20:22-23:33), which is addressed to the People of Israel by Moses. In its immediate context the *lex talionis* is cited in describing the penalties regarding injury to a pregnant woman and/or the unborn child (21:22). James Davis succinctly summarizes its larger context (21:1-27): "It also sets out the requirements in the case of murder (both meditated and premeditated), striking or cursing a parent, kidnapping, fighting resulting in injury, beating of servants and the case of maiming a male or female servant."<sup>6</sup> Among this listing of statutes, there is a certain ambiguity regarding the proper application of the *lex* principle. As Thachuparamban rightly points out, "The text does not say whether this law [of *lex talionis*] must be interpreted literally or can be mitigated by monetary compensation... However, the context (21:18-19) indicates compensation for physical injuries."<sup>7</sup> We will return to this question of literal retaliation or monetary compensation for injury throughout this examination of Old Testament and Early Judaism texts.

The second Old Testament passage for our consideration reads, "Anyone who inflicts a permanent injury on his or her neighbor shall receive the same in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The same injury that one gives another shall be inflicted in return" (Lv 24:19-20). The holiness code (17:1-26:46), which lays out the instructions to the People of Israel regarding the requirements for feasts, the Sabbath, and the

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3 Barbara E. Reid, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, NCBC (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), 36.

4 Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, SP 1 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 91.

5 Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2009), 196.

6 James F. Davis, *Lex Talionis in Early Judaism and the Exhortation of Jesus in Matthew 5.38-42*, JSNTSup 281 (London: T&T Clark International, 2005), 37.

7 Johnny Thachuparamban, *Jesus and the Law in the Matthean Community: A Source- and Redaction-Critical Study of Mt 5:38-48* (Delhi: Allianz Enterprises, 2011), 264.

tabernacle, contains this tangential pericope (24:10-22). Beginning with a description of stoning as the proper punishment for blasphemy (24:14-15), the passage continues with listing the appropriate penalties for murder, killing of an animal, and bodily injury. In his consideration of this passage, Davis argues, "Leviticus 24 provides the strongest compelling case that a literal application of the talion for intentional maiming incidents toward persons was intended for the nation of Israel."<sup>8</sup>

The third text reads, "Do not show pity. Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, and foot for foot" (Dt 19:21). Read alone, this verse seems to suggest a literal application of the talion, but in its larger context (19:15-21) in which it details how to deal with people who offer false testimony it takes on a less literal connotation. Thachuparamban explains that the text "focuses on two explicit functions of the *lex talionis*: first, to punish the false accusers so that evil can no longer exist in the midst of the people, and second, to warn the people to abstain from false testimony."<sup>9</sup> In other words, the principle is utilized to emphasize the importance of offering truthful testimony and seems to be less about a literal maiming of one who has caused injury.

Because analysis of these three primary Old Testament passages as well as other secondary OT passages (i.e., Gn 9:6, Nm16:14, Jgs 1:6-7) do not reveal whether a literal retaliation, divine retribution, or monetary compensation was understood by ancient Israel as the most appropriate response to bodily injury, scholars differ greatly as to how *lex talionis* would have been understood by Jesus's first-century audience.<sup>10</sup> However, Davis's comprehensive study of Early Judaism sources has convinced me that the most complete understanding of this principle is to recognize a fundamental shift from a literal understanding to one that promoted financial compensation. Davis explains,

[I]n the second century AD and later, Jewish rabbinic leadership was essentially unified that the OT did not require a literal talion but that financial penalties could be substituted in court matters. However, in the first century AD (and likely earlier) evidence supports the position that application of literal talion in judicial maiming was a significant and viable Jewish viewpoint (though not necessarily the majority view), and these two views must have been intensely debated in Jewish circles in the first century.<sup>11</sup>

This places the words of the Matthean Jesus right at the heart of this debate about the proper understanding of the *lex talionis* principle as it transitioned from a literal interpretation of ancient Israel to an understanding that regulated financial compensation in rabbinic Judaism. In other words, there were most likely some in the audience of the Matthean Jesus who believed financial compensation was the best response and others who believed that physical retaliation was the best response according to Jewish Law. At the root of both positions is the intention to end the cycle of violence. But in reality the cycle is perpetuated when the evildoer is either maimed or forced to pay monetary compensation. The Matthean Jesus is challenging both positions and calling for actions that reject the ingrained patterns of violence.

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8 Davis, *Lex Talionis in Early Judaism*, 54.

9 Thachuparamban, *Jesus and the Law*, 265.

10 See Kenner, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 196, where he writes, "An eye for an eye' *never* meant that a person could exact vengeance directly for his or her own eye; it meant that one should take the offender to court where the sentence could be executed legally" (emphasis mine). See also Richard A. Horsley, "Ethics and Exegesis: 'Love Your Enemies' and the Doctrine of Non-Violence," *JAAR* 54 (1986): 3-31, 19-20, "...by Jesus' time, and certainly by Matthew's the *lex talionis* was interpreted not in terms of cases of violence and personal mutilation, but 'as signifying the claim to accurate, nicely calculated compensation' for personal humiliation."

11 Davis, *Lex Talionis in Early Judaism*, 100.

## Translating μή ἀντιστῆναι τῷ πονηρῷ

Jesus's call for breaking the cycle of violence will be illustrated by an analysis of the translation of the Greek text μή ἀντιστῆναι τῷ πονηρῷ (Mt 5:39a) and of a close reading of the mini-parables (5:39-42) that follow. Critical

to understanding the message of Jesus is the correct translation of the Greek phrase μή ἀντιστῆναι τῷ πονηρῷ (5:39a), most particularly the word ἀντιστῆναι. A survey of English translations, including "Do not resist an evildoer" (NRSV); "Do not resist those who wrong you" (REB); "...offer no resistance to one who is evil" (NABRE); and "...offer no resistance to the wicked" (NJB), reveal that the most common translation is "resist(ance)." However, rendering ἀντιστῆναι as "resistance" does not adequately convey the message that is expressed in the following mini-parables, nor does this translation jive with the overall message expressed by the words and deeds of Jesus.

Walter Wink explains why such a translation can be problematic. He writes, "Some who have tried to follow Jesus' words have understood it to mean nonresistance: let the oppressor perpetrate evil unopposed...Interpreted thus, the passage has become a basis for the systematic training in cowardice, as Christians are taught to acquiesce to evil. Cowardice is scarcely a term one associates with Jesus."<sup>12</sup> Perhaps even more dangerous to rendering μή ἀντιστῆναι simply as nonresistance is the danger of losing the entire message of the fifth antithesis. Michael Winger illustrates this point: "Beginning with *turn the other cheek*, these examples entail not only the acceptance of injury, but positive assistance to further injury. It suggests, rather, an even more extraordinary principle: Do not resist injury; instead, accept *and invite it*."<sup>13</sup> This is a dangerous message to give to the oppressed Jewish population of first-century Palestine; it is perhaps an even more dangerous message to convey to victims of domestic violence.

An exploration of how ἀντιστῆναι is utilized throughout the Septuagint and contemporary Jewish literature helps shed some light on a better interpretation. The verb ἀντιστῆναι "is used in the LXX primarily for armed resistance in military encounters (44 out of 71 times). Josephus uses ἀντιστῆναι for violent struggle 15 out of 17 times, Philo 4 out of 10."<sup>14</sup> The precise interpretation of ἀντιστῆναι is determined by its context. For example, Eph 6:13 utilizes ἀντιστῆναι in a metaphorical description of a battle scene with the forces of evil. "Resistance" is an accurate translation, but violent resistance is certainly the connotation. Based on his analysis of ἀντιστῆναι in the Septuagint, contemporary Jewish literature, and the mini-parables that follow, Wink rightly concludes,

In short, *antistēnai* means more in Matt. 5:39a than simply to "stand against" or "resist." It means to resist violently, to revolt or rebel, to engage in an insurrection. The logic of the text requires such a meaning: on the one hand, do not continue to be supine and complicit in your oppression; but on the other hand, do not react violently to it either. Rather find a third way, a way that is neither submission nor assault, neither flight nor fight, a way that can secure your human dignity and begin to change the power equation...<sup>15</sup>

Reid draws a similar conclusion: "Verse 39a is best translated 'do not retaliate against the evildoer.' The verb ἀντιστῆναι most often carries the connotation 'resist violently' or 'armed resistance in military encounters.'"<sup>16</sup> Understanding the context of ἀντιστῆναι elsewhere in the Septuagint and the subsequent Matthean mini-parables, the best translation of verse 39a is "do not retaliate *in like manner* against the evildoer." In other words, do not use the same tactics that the evildoer has employed against you. This is consistent with the root message of

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<sup>12</sup> Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 175.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Winger, "Hard Sayings," *The ExpTim* 115 (2004): 268

<sup>14</sup> Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 185.

<sup>15</sup> Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 185.

<sup>16</sup> Reid, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 39.

the *lex talionis* principle and the life and message of Jesus, which is always directed toward breaking the cycles of violence.

### Understanding the Mini-Parables of the Fifth Antithesis

Before moving into a systematic analysis of the following verses or mini-parables of the fifth antithesis, it is important to properly understand the function of parables. As Reid describes the overall purpose of parables throughout the Gospels, “[The] purpose is to persuade the hearer to adopt a particular view of God and life in God’s realm. Their aim is to convert the hearer. They turn the world upside down by challenging presumptions, reversing expectations, and proposing a different view of life with God. Their open endings make it necessary for the hearers of every age to grapple with their implications.”<sup>17</sup> This is precisely how each mini-parable functions in Matthew 35b-42; each action proposed by the Matthean Jesus challenges presumptions, reverses expectations, and proposes a different view of life with God. In his commentary on the examples of the fifth antithesis, Ulrich Luz writes, “They are the expression of protest against dehumanizing spirals of violence and of the hope for a different kind of personal behavior than what can be experienced in everyday life...they demand active behavior in which there is both an element of protest and an element of provocative contrast against the force used to rule the world.”<sup>18</sup> What follows is a systematic analysis of how the Matthean Jesus is calling his followers of yesterday and today to recognize opportunities to creatively break the cycles of violence that permeate our world.

The first example reads, “When someone strikes you on [your] right cheek, turn the other one to him as well” (Mt 5:39b). Read in the twenty-first century, much of the connotation of this statement is lost; it simply sounds like that the victim is to offer his or her cheek expecting another slap. However, Wink succinctly summarizes the details of such a slap and the expected response of a first-century audience:

To hit the right cheek with a fist would require using the left hand, but in that society the left hand was used only for unclean tasks...The only way one could naturally strike the right cheek with the right hand would be with the back of the hand. We are dealing here with an insult, not a fistfight. The intention is clearly not to injure, but to humiliate, to put someone in his or her place...A backhand slap was the usual way of admonishing inferiors...The only normal response would be cowering submission.<sup>19</sup>

The typical response to this backhanded slap, which intends to insult the victim, is cowering submission; it is the response the audience would have expected Jesus to describe in such a situation. But true to parabolic form and function, Jesus suggests a response that startles the audience and causes them to recognize new possibility. Offering the other cheek empowers the victim by refusing to accept another backhanded blow. Reid explains, “Turning the other cheek is a creative response that robs the aggressor of the power to humiliate and shames the one who intended to inflict shame. It interrupts the cycle of violence, which is the first step toward restoration of right relation. [In the best case scenario, it] could move the aggressor toward repentance, leading to reconciliation.”<sup>20</sup> It is important to caution that a literal reading of this scenario is not the point. For example, a victim of domestic abuse is *not* expected to continue to accept violence from his or her partner. Rather the illustration is calling the victim, both then and now, to recognize that they are *not* stuck in the seemingly unbreakable cycle of violence. The Matthean Jesus does not call for a submissive acceptance of violence; instead he invites the victim to resist evil without seeking retaliation.

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17 Barbara E. Reid, *Parables for Preachers. Year A* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 16-17.

18 Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 274.

19 Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 176.

20 Reid, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 39.

In his second mini-parable the Matthean Jesus offers an opportunity for breaking the cycle of violence: “If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand him your cloak as well” (5:40). Craig Keener explicates the details of this scenario for the twenty-first century reader: “Many peasants had only one outer cloak...and pursued whatever legal recourse necessary to get it back if it were seized; without the cloak a person would be naked and cold...biblical law permitted no one to take it even as a pledge overnight (Ex 22:26-27; Dt 24:12-13); Jesus demands that one surrender the one possession the law explicitly protects from legal seizure.”<sup>21</sup> Again the audience is left wondering, for what purpose would I want to stand cold and naked before my creditors and peers? How does this unsuspected action contribute to nonviolent resistance? As illustrated by the story of Noah’s nakedness and the shame experienced by his sons (Gn 9:20-27), “Nakedness was taboo in Judaism, and shame fell less on the naked party than on the person viewing or causing the nakedness.”<sup>22</sup> Again, the tables have been turned; the victim who is shamed by her/his inability to pay is empowered to nonviolently resist an economic system that deprives one of even the most meager items of clothing. As Wink cleverly describes this scenario, “Strip naked and parade out of court, thus taking the momentum of the law and the whole debt economy and flipping them, jujitsu-like, in a burlesque of legality.”<sup>23</sup> Read this way, the Matthean Jesus is not calling for further victimization, but rather invites a creative solution to an economic system that further marginalized the poor.

The third mini-parable utilized to illustrate this call for breaking the cycles of violence reads, “Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go with him for two miles” (Mt 5:41). Again Keener helps the modern reader understand the context of these words in first-century Palestine: “Because tax revenues did not cover all the Roman army’s needs, soldiers could requisition what they required and legally demand local inhabitants to provide forced labor. Throughout the duration of Roman rule soldiers were known to sometimes abuse this privilege...”<sup>24</sup> This example, which calls for walking an extra mile in service of an oppressive occupying army, definitely would have startled the first-century audience. As Wink interprets this third example, “Jesus does not encourage Jews to walk a second mile in order to build up merit in heaven, or to exercise a supererogatory piety, or to kill the soldier with kindness. He is helping an oppressed people find a way to protest and neutralize an onerous practice despised throughout the empire...”<sup>25</sup> Protesting violence and oppression without submission or violent retaliation seems to be the focus of this third mini-parable.

The fourth example exhorts the audience to “give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on the one who wants to borrow” (5:42). The least parabolic of the four illustrations offered by Jesus, this loses little in translation from first-century Palestine to today. There are many people who are in need of our assistance; Jesus is calling us to give without overthinking the situation or counting the costs. If someone is in need; we should give freely. Neufeld summarizes how each example of the fifth antithesis calls believers to action, writing “In each of these ‘mini-parables’ victims do not behave as victims. Nor do they perform a predictable script of rebellion, retaliation or acquiescence. These are clearly ways in which the spiral of violence is disrupted if not broken.”<sup>26</sup> Within these statements there is an exhortation to live differently; to stand up and speak out against the violence that permeates our society. “By formulating what is said in a shocking and extreme way...Jesus has intentionally used astonishing, disorienting and perplexing language. He wants to urge his hearers to reflection; he wants to break through their vistas on human relations and open new perspectives...His reasons are not coolly reasoned arguments...They are persuasive, exhorting...”<sup>27</sup> statements that are intended to disrupt us; to

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21 Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 198.

22 Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 179.

23 Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 185.

24 Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 200.

25 Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 182.

26 Neufeld, *Killing Enmity*, 24-25.

27 Jan Lambrecht, “The Sayings of Jesus about Nonviolence,” in *Swords into Plowshares: Theological Reflections on Peace* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1991), 136-37.

draw us outside of our comfort zone and encourage us to actively take steps against the cycles of violence in our present society.

### **An Exhortation to Church Leaders**

When I first set out to write this paper, I intended to utilize these words of Jesus as an opportunity to empower women and men who are victims of domestic violence. This is still my overall goal; however, the more I read the more I realized that giving advice without the proper training could actually lead to more harm. In his article "A Plea to Clergy," Al Miles depicts the story of Carla, who received bad advice from her pastor when she asked him for help. His advice was both damaging and unhelpful for the battered wife. At the conclusion of the article Miles quotes Carla. "'Wake up, pastors and priests! Carla begs 'There are women, men, and children in your churches in need of help. Please educate yourselves about domestic violence!'"<sup>28</sup> Thus, as a young man who is being trained as a leader in our Church, I realized that there is a message that can be shared with fellow Church leaders that is deeply tied to the fifth antithesis. In speaking to the crowds and his disciples of the first century, Jesus is also speaking to victims and church leaders of today. He is exhorting both to go forth and break the cycles of violence. It is this latter group (current and future Church leaders) that needs to understand the cycles of violence that are present within our congregations and do everything in our power to break down these cycles.

### **Knowing the Facts**

According to the Centers for Disease Control, "over 10 million women and men in the United States experience physical violence each year by a current or former intimate partner. Further, over 1 in 5 women (22.3%) and nearly 1 in 7 men (14.0%) have experienced severe physical violence by an intimate partner at some point in their lifetime, translating to nearly 29 million U.S. women and nearly 16 million U.S. men."<sup>29</sup> As startling as these numbers are they are actually lower than suggested by others sources, which indicate as many as one in three women suffer from some form of domestic abuse in their lifetime.<sup>30</sup> Either way, this means that on any given Sunday a very large percentage of the people in our gathered assemblies are currently mired in the cycle of domestic violence. In order to facilitate change; it is critical that we as Church leaders know what domestic violence is and how the cycle typically works. Alpert et al. succinctly define domestic violence and explain its cyclical pattern:

Domestic violence (also known as spouse abuse, partner violence, intimate partner violence, battering, and numerous other terms) is a pattern of coercion used by one person to exert power and control over another person in the context of a dating, family or household relationship...Physical violence is often cyclical and recurrent. Apologies and promises of hope and change often follow a violent episode. There is then a variable period of increasing tension, culminating in a subsequent episode of violence. Especially following an episode of violence, the survivor may feel hopeful that caring behavior, apologies, and promises herald an end to the abuse, and that the situation will improve... Unfortunately, without professional help from a certified batterer intervention program, the cycle of violence usually begins anew, often with more dangerous consequences in future assaults.<sup>31</sup>

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28 Al Miles, "Domestic Violence Awareness Month," *Clergy Journal* 80, no. 1 (October 2003): 17.

29 Matthew J. Breiding et al., *Intimate Partner Violence Surveillance: Uniform Definitions and Recommended Data Elements, Version 2.0* (Atlanta: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015), 1.

30 See Elaine J. Alpert, Al Miles, and Vicki Coffey, *Responding to Domestic Violence: An Interfaith Guide to Prevention and Intervention* (Chicago: Chicago Metropolitan Battered Women's Network, 2005), 7. "According to recent research, nearly one in every three U.S. women reported being physically abused by a spouse or boyfriend at some point in her life." See also "Violence and Abuse," <http://www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/data-briefs/1999/may/violence-and-abuse>: "One-third (31%) of all women have been kicked, hit or punched, choked, or otherwise physically abused by a spouse or partner in their lifetimes."

31 Alpert et al., *Responding to Domestic Violence*, 9, 12, 14.

As with the cycles of violence addressed by the Matthean Jesus in the fifth antithesis, many victims feel as if they are trapped within this constant cycle of violence. They long for the resources to help them move beyond their current situation. Just as in first-century Palestine, violent retaliation is a dangerous and even life-threatening option. As Church leaders, we need to facilitate opportunities for battered women and men to recognize that they *do* have options.

### **Part of the Problem**

Unfortunately, over our two thousand years of Church history, many Church leaders have often been part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Many have contributed to the problem by not speaking out and/or through offering misinformation to their congregations. For instance, poor interpretation of scripture has contributed to a culture of acceptance of violence against women. Susan Thistlethwaite argues that patriarchal attitudes in scripture and exegesis over the centuries have “led ultimately to wife abuse by legitimatizing the subordinate defenseless position of wives vis-a-vis husbands.”<sup>32</sup> Pamela Cooper-White illustrates with a specific example from the fifth antithesis: “One of survivors’ most common complaints is that their pastors or other religious leaders and counselors have pressured them into forgiving and ‘turning the other cheek’...All too often, survivors of violence are retraumatized by pastors...If the survivor tries to forgive [too quickly], she can only fail, and her failure will reinforce all the self-blame and shame of her original abuse.”<sup>33</sup> This is clearly a misuse of scripture and a misinterpretation of the Matthean Jesus, who intended to exhort his followers to work toward breaking the cycles of violence, not to perpetuate them.

In their 2002 statement *When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women*, the USCCB spoke specifically against the misuse of scripture. It states, “We condemn the use of the Bible to support abusive behavior in any form. A correct reading of Scripture leads people to an understanding of the equal dignity of men and women and to relationships based on mutuality and love...Scripture teaches that women and men are created in God’s image. Jesus himself always respected the human dignity of women.”<sup>34</sup> Thistlethwaite echoes the call of the United States bishops to empower and not disenfranchise victims, “For battered women [and men]...Scripture can be seen to be on their side in new ways. Abused women [and men] are the victims of an unjust power distribution in society, an injustice contrary to the will of God. Resistance to this injustice must be interpreted as doing God’s will by attempting to establish justice.”<sup>35</sup> As illustrated throughout this paper, Jesus is not calling for passive submission to violence. He is calling us to break the cycles of violence

### **Part of the Solution**

As Alpert et al. explain in *Responding to Domestic Violence: An Interfaith Guide to Prevention and Intervention*, church leaders can make a real difference in our worshipping communities:

Clergy and other spiritual leaders can be key in the quest for prevention by supporting efforts by individual congregants and by working in collaboration with clergy and spiritual leaders from other congregations and from multiple community agencies to view domestic violence prevention as a spiritual calling. Clergy who take a leadership role can set a tone and prepare the stage for a profound and sustainable change in the way each and every congregant views both healthy and un

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32 Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, “Battered Women and the Bible: From Subjection to Liberation,” *Christianity and Crisis* 41, no. 18 (November 18, 1981): 313.

33 Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence against Women and the Church’s Response*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 251.

34 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Inc., “When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women” (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002), 5.

35 Thistlethwaite, “Battered Women,” 313.

healthy relationships. Every time the words domestic violence, healthy relationships, respect for women and children, and prevention are mentioned in sermons, individual and group discussions, publications and newsletters, and in communications with the community at-large, a climate for prevention is fostered and a legacy of peace and respect is sown.<sup>36</sup>

Thankfully, the Catholic Church is beginning to recognize its role in breaking the cycle of domestic violence. In 1992 (updated and re-released in 2002), the United States bishops released their pastoral letter in which they address victims, abusers, and parish leaders. “The Church can help break this cycle. Many abused women seek help first from the Church because they see it as a safe place. Even if their abusers isolate them from other social contacts, they may still allow them to go to church.”<sup>37</sup> Perhaps most important for all Catholics to hear directly from the bishops regarding abuse is the following message: “We emphasize that no person is expected to stay in an abusive marriage. Some abused women believe that church teaching on the permanence of marriage requires them to stay in an abusive relationship. They may hesitate to seek a separation or divorce...Violence and abuse, not divorce, break up a marriage.”<sup>38</sup> The document continues with specific suggestions for first responders (priests, deacons, lay ministers), emphasizing safety for victims, accountability for abusers, and familiarity with local professional resources for both victims and abusers. In my estimation, it is our responsibility as church leaders to familiarize ourselves with this document written by the U.S. bishops as well as other similar resources provided by church authorities and local agencies. Preaching, teaching, facilitating groups, and other opportunities for learning and support are demanded of us by the exhortation of Jesus in the fifth antithesis to do everything in our power to break the cycles of violence.

## Conclusion

In this socio-rhetorical reading of Matthew’s fifth antithesis, we have examined the root message of the Old Testament *lex talionis* principle. In all likelihood this principle went through a transition from a literal understanding to an understanding based on monetary compensation. Jesus challenges both understandings and exhorts his followers to break the cycles of violence. His mini-parables exhort his audience to go “beyond both inaction and overreaction, capitulation and murderous counterviolence, to a new response, fired in the crucible of love, that promises to liberate the oppressed from evil even as it frees the oppressor from sin.”<sup>39</sup> This is consistent with the Matthean Jesus, who encourages all believers to work together to build the “kingdom of heaven” (i.e., Mt 3:2, 4:17, 5:3, 5:10, 5:19). Specifically as church leaders, we are invited to recognize the example of Christ and imitate it. “Every renunciation of violence and methods of coercion is accompanied by an invitation to a better way and a modeling of that way...For the way of Christ calls to the deepest resources within the human spirit and represents the highest in both divine example and human dignity.”<sup>40</sup> In the case of domestic violence, we as church leaders have the opportunity to be a force for change in our local communities. It is our responsibility to understand the cycle of domestic violence and do everything within our power to enable the grace of God to bring about prevention, support, and healing for those mired in these cycles.<sup>41</sup>

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36 Alpert et al., *Responding to Domestic Violence*, 41.

37 “When I Call for Help,” 1.

38 “When I Call for Help,” 6.

39 Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 186.

40 William Klassen, *Love of Enemies: The Way to Peace*. Overtures to Biblical Theology 15 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 137.

41 See Appendix A for a sampling of resources to assist the process of working for change in our universal and particular church communities.

## Appendix A

### National Domestic Violence Hotline

<http://www.thehotline.org/>

Callers to The Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) can expect highly trained, experienced advocates to offer compassionate support, crisis intervention information, and referral services in over 170 languages. Visitors to the website can find information about domestic violence, safety planning, local resources, and ways to support the organization.

### Catholic Bishops' Position on Domestic Violence

<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/marriage/domestic-violence/when-i-call-for-help.cfm>

“As pastors of the Catholic Church in the United States, we state as clearly and strongly as we can that violence against women, inside or outside the home, is never justified. Violence in any form—physical, sexual, psychological, or verbal—is sinful; often, it is a crime as well.” The document details the USCCB position.

### Archdiocese of Chicago Domestic Violence Resource Manual

[https://www.familyministries.org/resources/index.asp?c\\_id=159&t\\_id=114](https://www.familyministries.org/resources/index.asp?c_id=159&t_id=114)

The Domestic Violence (DV) Manual is a collection of information from a variety of sources available to the general public free of charge. This manual will be very useful to those ministering in the area of domestic violence and closely related areas. The manual is designed to be a living document, which means that additions and subtractions may occur from time to time.

The manual is organized in conjunction with the threefold mission of the Archdiocese DV Outreach—Awareness, Services & Prevention. Below is a sample of over 50 links available on the site.

#### Awareness

- An Interfaith Guide to Prevention & Intervention
- Do's & Don't with a Battered Woman
- Videos of First Person Accounts
- Data, Surveys, Statistics & Much More

#### Services

- How to Establish Domestic Violence Ministry
- Bulletin Articles, Prayers of the Faithful, Preaching Suggestions

#### Prevention

- Dating & Sexual Violence Prevention
- First person accounts, Brochures, Reporting Information
- Material Promoting Healthy Relationships

#### Additional Resources

- Hotlines, Information, Counseling/Data Collection Form