

SCRATCHING DOESN'T HELP

I wish to make some comments today about fighting evil. It is something we would all like to be able to do. It is something we all believe needs to be done. Somebody needs to be doing something about all the injustice, cruelty, greed, selfishness, and abuse that are touching and hurting and, in many instances, ruining and destroying human life around the globe. Good people need to do something about it. If you are not doing something about it, you must be part of the evil establishment. Everybody knows that. Fighting evil and being good are two sides of the same coin.

I'm not sure whether we learn this or are born knowing it. I suspect the latter. But many in my generation learned it consciously from the Lone Ranger. Coming out of childhood, however, we began to discover that evil was too big a task for one individual to conquer, no matter how willing or dedicated that individual might be. Structures and organizations and forces could easily swirl around the efforts of one individual to set things right – yet a week or a month or a year later, things would be as bad or worse than before, no matter how valiantly someone fought the good fight. Some of us have left this or that organization or job or project “in protest,” thinking it would make a mighty statement and that, seeing it clearly, everybody would band together and make things right, and then our sacrifice would be vindicated. But it never worked. Two days or a week later, it was as if we had never been there.

So we grew up. And growing up, for many of us, was the realization that we could not fight evil all alone. Growing up was the realization that we were allowed to do it in groups. That was the good news. We could band together. The task, then, for good people, was to find or create a group of good people who would fight evil together. No more Lone Ranger. So we entered the age of capital initials, the time of building organizations to overcome the evil and injustice and pain of the world: USA, UCC, NAACP, PTA, YMCA – and the list today is fast heading toward infinity. Behind it, sometimes consciously but less and less so as time goes on, is the almost archetypal awakening: The Lone Ranger is no match for Adolph Hitler, or at least no match for the Third Reich. It takes the combined Allied Forces – all the good people of the world coming together in a pact of sacrifice unto death. Then we win. And after that, the good people have to help all the poor people caught in bad systems recover and turn good again. I am talking theology, not history – a belief system, not fact. Life moves on and we are always reformulating our

beliefs according to our experience, but that generalized picture cuts deep, and it has been foundational for over a century.

What we know now is that this does not work either. Only, we have to be careful about how we say that. For some it works well enough, for a while. To do some good, for no matter how short a period, is still better than joining evil. “It is better to light just one little candle than to stumble in the dark.” (J. Maloy Roach, George Mysel.) To feed one person, one more day, is better than not caring. You can “make a difference” is one of the key phrases in almost every appeal of our time. By silent, mutual agreement, we don’t ask and we don’t want to know for how short a time, or how futile that difference will be.

Somewhere in our world there is a different note entirely – a different comprehension of reality. All at the same time, it is baffling, appealing, annoying – and all three in the extreme. It does not see evil as white hats against black hats. Evil *permeates* this level of existence; it is found inside as well as outside. Any individual or organization dedicated to fighting evil will discover evil within as well as without. Fighting evil will not work, because evil will take all our efforts – even the very motives within us that wish to fight and overcome evil – and warp them, twist them, and turn them back against us. “I hate everybody who doesn’t love everybody.” “If you don’t act nice, I’ll thrash the daylights out of you.” I know there is such a thing as righteous indignation, but I also know that in every passionate movement to right wrongs, there is also *a rage to destroy* that which is causing or perpetuating the evil. That’s the rub. Any rage to destroy is, by definition, evil. Forces of goodness, light, and life seek to create, nurture, and enhance – not destroy.

On the one hand, it is something everybody knows. On the other hand, it is something nobody knows well enough. And certainly it is something the world does not seem to comprehend or live by very often. We keep saying things like: “Yes, I know that’s the truth in principle, but in real life right now, we have to be practical and do the best we can.” Whatever that means.

This is getting heavy. Let’s scratch it all and start over.

I am often amazed and perplexed at the precepts and concepts that come to us from the records about Jesus. Here at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, where many of us have struggled for hours in study groups, we come onto material that is truly baffling. That is, we cannot imagine ourselves being able to live in such a manner in this

present world. We can manage it at moments, *for* moments, perhaps. And because we are different individuals with different strengths, we usually disagree about which of the precepts is the most difficult. Some of us have trouble with the part about not looking at a woman lustfully. Others have more trouble not looking at money lustfully, or not looking at good health lustfully, or not looking at security lustfully. As a matter of fact, some people would rather question the whole premise itself: What's wrong with lust? It's a lot like zest, in some people's minds. It makes life exciting. It's sort of upbeat and positive – enthusiastic and hopeful. At least lustful people don't sit around moping and depressed all the time. They are fun to be with, even if you do have to be a little careful, a little on your toes, when they are around. Even that beats boredom. If it were you, would you rather people looked at you with a little lust sometimes, or would you be content to always have them look at you with boredom and disinterest? Fortunately, those are not the only choices, but if they were?

My point, if I can make it before I get lynched, is that Jesus keeps confusing us by introducing precepts and approaches that are quite unusual for us humans. For over a thousand years, it had seemed demanding enough for God to command us not to *act* on our lust. It never crossed anyone's mind that we would not even *have* lust. And now Jesus calls us to live beyond, above, or without lust? Mind you, even the Chosen People, never mind the rest of the world, have not been able to show any great ability to live by the commandment itself yet, so how are they (or we) supposed to track Jesus into this higher principle *behind* it?

Many of us have tried hard – we think to the best of our ability – and have concluded that we are unable to live up to all the precepts in the Sermon on the Mount (if we take them seriously) for even one full twenty-four-hour period. To paraphrase Lincoln: We can keep all of the precepts some of the time and some of the precepts all of the time, but we cannot live in obedience to all of the wisdom of this great sermon all of the time. That does not mean the sermon is flawed! That does not mean the precepts it proclaims are wrong. The longer most of us think about this sermon, the more we realize that Jesus is telling us truth: This is how it *ought* to be. This is how it *must* be if humans are to live together in true peace and harmony and love. Yet in a broken world – in a temporal realm like this one – hearing it lined out is a strange and eerie experience. Having what we are familiar with lined up and compared to the necessary requirements for a loving, meaningful, and worshipful life is, to say the very least, disconcerting.

Consider with me verse thirty-nine: *“Do not resist one who is evil.”* Does that not sound crazy!? I can hardly believe my ears. Is it not among our most cherished Christian responsibilities to defend the oppressed, to fight evil, to protect as many people as we can from harm? *Of course* we have to resist evil, and fight those who spread or perpetuate it. This *must* be a misprint or a mistranslation. Damn! It’s right back to that same eerie, weird perspective we were trying to escape.

Well, maybe it is just an isolated comment. There are lots of one-liners in the Bible that no sane person would try to build their lives around. (*“If your right hand offends you, cut it off.”*) But this is not an isolated comment. From the day Cain killed Abel to the closing chapters of Revelation, we find this strange theme. *“Do not resist one who is evil... Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”* (Matthew 5:39,44) How many times should we forgive the neighbor who has wronged us? *“Seventy times seven.”* (Matthew 18:22) *“A good tree cannot bear evil fruit.”* (Matthew 7:18; Luke 6:43) Meaning, you are never permitted to hurt or destroy, no matter what the provocation. And on and on it goes. *“Beloved, never avenge yourselves Repay no one evil for evil Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”* (Romans 12:16-21)

It is interesting to me that this is such a foreign way of thinking that we literally cannot stand it. For example, among the denominations, the United Church of Christ is known to have a strong peace agenda. That is, it is sensitive and aware of such issues in many ways. But in its two most formal, almost creedal pronouncements (the Statement of Faith and, to a lesser degree, the Statement of Mission), it directly contradicts the teachings of Jesus. *“He calls us into his church ... to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil.”* But Jesus says, *“Do not resist one who is evil.”* Whom do we believe? Jesus, or the United Church of Christ?

Well, we are starting to get too heavy again, aren’t we? Time to start over yet again. Maybe even time to talk about something I know something about.

Scratching doesn’t help. If I have an itch, my natural tendency and desire are to scratch it. As a matter of fact, I do have an itch. A few years ago, I came back from an outing with my son Brennan and thought I had picked up some poison oak. I have had some experience with poison oak and am relatively careful, but there it was, driving me crazy. The doctor gave me some medicine and it went away, but it came back worse than

ever as soon as the medicine was gone. Well, after this and that and finally going to a dermatologist and getting a biopsy, the news was that I had a rare and incurable skin disease. It is noncommunicable (you will be happy to hear), with no known cause, or cure. And it is very much like perpetually getting a fresh dose of poison oak every few days. I just want you to know that I *know* about itching. I am one of the world's foremost experts on itching. At least that is what the doctor told me.

And now I am here to tell *you*: Scratching doesn't help. Sometimes it is almost unbelievable to think that scratching will not help. Surely scratching will remove the offending cause. Surely scratching will tear out whatever poison is creating this reaction. Surely there is some logic to this natural tendency to scratch. The impulse *must* have some rhyme or reason to it. Did it not come through the process of "natural selection" – a surviving product of evolution? *Of course* we are supposed to scratch an itch!

But my long-term experience is that scratching doesn't help. I have asked the medical experts if there is any situation (not just my own) – any condition they know of – where scratching *does* help. Instantly and without hesitation, they confirmed: Scratching *never* helps. It makes it worse. It adds injury to whatever wound or condition already exists. Fascinating.

We always want to believe we can scratch out evil. We think if we scratch hard enough – fight evil with sufficient determination – we can tear the poison from our systems and organizations, or at least remove the evil people causing the trouble. Besides, it is so natural – such a logical and obvious reaction – to seek vengeance, to oppress oppressors, to fight back, to destroy that which threatens us. Surely it will work. It *has* to work. Rip it out of there! Only, scratching doesn't help.

The truth is, scratching makes everything worse, in all situations – without exception. I can hardly believe it. Even though my mind is forced to it, I still can hardly believe it. One of my favorite movies in all the world is called *Shane*. What the hero did was so brave and sacrificial and unselfish and beautiful. It brings tears to my eyes just thinking about it. ("Shane, come back!") But *Shane* had it wrong. We did not get to see the sequel. Other guns will come into the valley, and new tyrants will arise. Evil breeds evil. Destruction draws destruction. It doesn't help to scratch, no matter how much we want to – no matter how natural and logical and right it seems at the time.

Jesus is greater than Shane. He tells us the truth deeper and clearer, and He lives it. That does not mean I have lowered my opinion of Shane. He certainly loved his neighbors; he gave himself up for them. In many ways, Shane epitomizes the human being at its very best. That is what stuns and finally converts us: It was not enough. It was not good enough. There is still a categorical difference between Shane and Jesus. Even “love your neighbor as yourself” is not going to make it. Not even close, wonderful as that is. Shane scratched where it itched and was exceedingly good at it, but that will never redeem the world. Jesus, however, will. Jesus is the Christ.

In my own tiny experience, one of the problems is going to sleep. When I am awake – sometimes – my mind can overrule instinct and natural desire. The mind knows that the result will not be what the natural desire *thinks* it will be, so it blocks the action. But when I am asleep, the guard is gone. I wake up scratching. The damage is done before my mind can reset the blocks.

How often I go to sleep spiritually – go on automatic pilot; revert to my own devices and natural desires. Then somebody hurts me or something I care about, and I lash out. By the time my soul awakens and resets the disciplines of the strange New WAY, more damage is already done. And if my prayers have been neglected or if my study has not reminded me lately of the precepts of the New Way, then I start to justify it – claim that the old way is adequate or even superior. Surely *this time* the scratching will help. In this instance, we will be able to tear out the evil, or at least eliminate the cause of this particular problem. Sometimes we get really crazy trying to fight evil. It’s no joke, like my little itch. We can become consumed by anger, vengeance, retaliation, resentment. It is possible to scratch a place until it is so sore and bleeding that you cannot stand to touch it, and *still* have an insane desire to scratch some more. We can get on Satan’s wavelength until our whole lives are consumed by the battles we are fighting, instead of by the things we are creating, building, nurturing, loving. Do you want to build a home, or fight divorce? If you get really serious about either one, you will have to choose: to create, or to destroy. They are two different ways of life. Their rules, goals, and methods are different. They do not go hand in hand. Being good and fighting evil are not two sides of the same coin. They are poles apart. We end up having to choose. It is one of the hardest choices in life. “*Behold, I set before you the way of life, and the way of death. Choose life that you may live.*” (Deuteronomy 30:19; Jeremiah 21:8)

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When I scratch, I intend to scratch out evil, but the wound I leave is in me. It is not a redemptive wound. That is, it has not expelled any evil from me. It has only compounded the problem, delayed the healing, increased the suffering, spread the destruction. Scratching doesn't help. Not only do we make severe wounds ourselves, but the evil is not eradicated. It is not gone. If anything, it has grown stronger than ever. How long do we play Sorcerer's Apprentice?

Now the heartbreaking news: I cannot keep from scratching – not on my own hook; not by my own will or purpose alone. Oh sure, I can manage it for a while, no problem. As long as I am fully conscious and my mood is right, my mind is clear, and my frustration level is low, it's okay; I can handle it, itching *or* evil. The problem is, I am only like that for part of the time on my very best days. Evil, like my itching, goes on all the time – day in, day out, month after month, year after year. Eventually I will be caught off guard. Eventually I will sucker back into the anger, the resentments, the challenges of fighting evil. And I will convince myself that this time it's okay to scratch – this time it will be brave and noble to go coldcock some dirty, double-dealing so-and-so. (Probably somebody the Spirit is just about to turn into an Apostle Paul.) I say to myself: *this time* it will serve God to turn my life and my light toward the dark.

Do you understand me, any of you? The truth is, I cannot keep from scratching – not by myself, not over time, not for the long haul. My only hope for light and life is a Savior: One who loves me, even though part of me is still wrong. One who heals me, even though I did some of the wounding. One I can follow and believe in – turn my life and my will over to – knowing my own light and will are insufficient. One whose truth is far beyond anything I would ever dream up or comprehend without Him. “*Do not resist one who is evil.*” On my best day, I would never have come up with that. On my best day, I cannot live it without His help. I like to scratch. And I go on scratching, until my life is not my own.

How then shall we live? Trust Jesus, or go scratch ...