

How the Sermon on the Mount *Can* be the Church's "Manual" for Peacemaking

Presentation for panel on "The Church and Nonviolence," University of San Diego, 7 October 2017

Gerald W. Schlabach

University of St. Thomas

The juxtaposition in the title of our panel – "The Church and Nonviolence" – may be far more significant than it seems. In more ways than I will have time to explore, the cluster of issues before us at this conference concerning war and peace has ecclesiology at its core, at least if we understand ecclesiology broadly and *ad extra*, facing outward to name the social posture of the people of God in the world. What I do have time to explore is a single word in Pope Francis's 2017 World Day of Peace message: "manual." The Sermon on the Mount, said the holy father, is to be Church's manual for peacemaking at every level, including international institutions and domestic policymaking where the Church seeks "to limit the use of force through the application of moral norms."¹

Historically, the Catholic Church has never explicitly denied the applicability of Jesus' teachings to public affairs.² It has not officially endorsed a view like that of the leading 20th-century Protestant thinker Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr bluntly argued that while human beings might barely be able to practice Jesus' ethic or "law of love" in a small face-to-face community or *Gemeinde*, Jesus's teachings could never apply to complex, modern, industrial societies – much less the international arena where the rough justice of a balance of power and self-interest is the best we can hope for.³ And yet, by drawing for centuries almost entirely on natural-law categories to address public affairs, and by sometimes relegating

Jesus' "hard sayings" to "evangelical counsels" for those with special vocations calling them to holiness, the working Catholic tradition has in effect taught exactly that for centuries. Only with the Second Vatican Council's universal call to holiness has this started to change. One could draw a direct line from that statement in *Lumen gentium* in 1964⁴ to the council's praise in *Gaudium et spes* a year later for those who renounce violence to vindicate their own rights in an act of personal holiness,⁵ to the growing recognition of active nonviolence in public affairs since John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus*,⁶ to Francis calling the Sermon on the Mount the Church's manual for peacemaking, to our gathering this weekend. The counsel's universal call to holiness was a massive tectonic shift, a slow-moving earthquake, and we are still trying to recover our footing. Francis' calling the Sermon on the Mount our manual for all peacemaking is one more tremor. Consider four ways that ecclesiology, war, and nonviolence converge:

1. If the magisterium does make an even more robust endorsement of strategic active nonviolence, how will it be received in pews where nationalism often trumps church teaching in times of war?
2. The Vatican's own diplomacy would seem to depend addressing national leaders who continue depend on last resort to military options with gradated counsel. (By that I mean ways to press the morally better or the morally even-better where the morally best seems politically unattainable.) So would less reliance on just-war discourse for mean muting Vatican diplomacy?
3. What pastoral approach would a Church that vigorously advocates for principled nonviolence take toward Catholics in the military and in positions of civil authority?
4. How do we stay in communion and nurture even greater church unity amid a great historic transition toward the "completely fresh reappraisal of war" that *Gaudium et spes* called for, if many in the Church disagree not only on where we should transition to, but on the very need for reappraisal?

My deeply held working assumption is this: To nurture and sustain church unity is itself a peacebuilding task. If we are not learning to practice reconciliation among Christians, we will be out of practice when we engage the world. Not only as individuals but as communities and as a global Church, we must – as Gandhi said – be the change we seek in the world. Ecclesiology and nonviolence must not be two topics brought into juxtaposition, but one integrated whole. So I would like to show how the "manual" for the Church's peacemaking that is the Sermon on the Mount speaks to both.

To do so I must indulge your patience by risking a slightly technical discussion on how to interpret Jesus' sermon in Matthew 5-7. The payoff will be a biblically grounded framework for doing three things simultaneously: (1) Prioritizing the nonviolent peacebuilding practices of the Church, while

(2) fulfilling the best intentions of the just-war tradition in attempting to provide pastoral guidance for those with what Francis has called the “lofty vocation” of politics, which, he says, remains “one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good,” and thus (3) strengthening the preeminent peacemaking task of the Church – that of firing the human imagination through the sacramental witness of its unity.

If the Sermon on the Mount has not served as our “manual” for peacemaking, that is arguably because of a widespread, longstanding, understandable, yet no less misleading approach to its interpretation. We have read it in twos, not threes – as a series of stark binaries, dyads, or antitheses rather than as triads. In Matthew 5, after all, a drumbeat of contrasts sets the pace: “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times ... but I say to you.” “You have heard it said ... but I say unto you....” Six times. The ready impression is that Jesus’ goal was to set a really high bar with a series of nearly impossible ideals: don’t even be angry, don’t even lust, don’t take any oaths, don’t even resist an evildoer, love even your enemies and persecutors without discrimination, thus be as perfect as your Father in heaven. Jesus must have thought that these high bars would at least make us jump a little higher, we conclude – before we despair. To be a manual for politics, business, and peacemaking at every level, the Sermon on the Mount must be practical, and all this sounds noble but it isn’t very realistic, we say. Practical morality must look instead to common sense, or natural law, or the utilitarian necessity wherein “you do what you gotta do” and ask forgiveness later. So goes the standard interpretation as it vacillates between idealistic rigorism and outright despair.

In a widely accepted exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount, the late Christian ethicist Glen Stassen, a Baptist, has shown otherwise.⁷ It is no accident that Stassen was also the force of nature who led a group of Christian ethicists and political scientists from both historically pacifist and historically just-war churches in developing and advocating for “just peacemaking theory.”⁸ In the wake of the Cold War, the just-peacemaking project seized on the opportunity to identify how, realistically, empirically, an unexpected measure of peace had broken out. Key both to the practicability of the Sermon on the Mount and to just peacemaking practices are the power of “transforming initiatives” that break us out of vicious cycles of violence and sin in ways that the traditional righteousness “you have heard it said” cannot do.

There, I just named the triad. This is the threefold pattern of teaching that is most identifiable in Matthew 5, but that Stassen convincingly shows to structure Matthew 6 and 7 as well in a series of 14 triads (also no coincidence, since Matthew liked numerology, lists 14 generations in Jesus' genealogy, and so on). With only slight and explainable variations that are the exceptions which prove the rule, Jesus first named the *traditional righteousness* that his Jewish listeners had heard either from rabbis or popular morality, then diagnosed the *vicious cycles* from which traditional righteousness alone could not escape, and then offered realistic, practicable *transforming initiatives* to escape those vicious cycles at last. Yes, they had heard it said, and yes, Jesus now said onto them. But what Jesus then said onto them in his own distinct teachings then came in two parts. And – how did we miss this for centuries? – in Greek his imperatives consistently came not in what we hear as hard sayings but in that third part, the transforming initiative. This is where the accent was to be for his disciples. This is where the accent should be for the Church, in all its teaching and programming.

Let's take a minute to see how this works. Matthew 5:21-26, the first of the 14 teachings that constitute the long central portion of the Sermon on the Mount, demonstrates the issues and pattern most transparently. It is a sign of the problems that come when we assume a dyadic or twofold structure to Jesus' teachings that when editors of modern translations want to add non-canonical subtitles, they don't know how to label this passage. Is it about murder? That's what verse 21 seems to announce. Then Jesus shifts our attention to anger and name-calling, and we hear Jesus saying never to be angry at all. But then we start to protest: *That's impossible. In fact, Jesus himself got angry.* So what's this really about?

We are starting to dismiss Jesus' teaching before we've even gotten through the passage; we are missing the guidance he is giving about taking the initiative to seek reconciliation. And did Jesus actually give the imperative, "don't ever get angry" or lower the threat of hell fire upon those who fail? No, the phrase is "if you are angry." If you are angry, judgmental, and insulting, certain things will logically follow. You are setting up a standard of judgment to which you yourself will be liable. By implication, so too will those who judge you. Unchecked, the ensuing cycle will spiral from an interpersonal "calling out," to a community council, to ultimate judgment before God. This is not a threat. It is simply a description of how things work, a diagnosis of the vicious cycle. Nothing wrong the ancient injunction

against murder. But in and of itself that traditional righteousness “said to those of ancient times” does not come with guidance about how to avoid the conditions that lead to temptation, hypocrisy, and recrimination, much less the ultimate breakdown of human relations through fratricide. Giving that practical guidance is Jesus’ primary concern, and a triadic exegesis puts the accent back where Jesus’ intention lay: *Take the initiative to seek out the one whom you have offended. Don’t wait! Leave the altar itself if necessary! Get going, and don’t drag your feet.* The imperatives – six of them – now come in quick succession.

Turning to the two triads at the end of chapter 5 that also relate to violence, retribution, and enemies, we have the Hebrews’ functional equivalent of Christian attempts to regulate and delimit warfare encapsulated in “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” and in the quote, “Love your neighbor, hate your enemy,” we have background assumptions at work when any tribe or nation prioritizes self-defense over everyone else’s good. These expressions of traditional righteousness are certainly an improvement over the fratricide of Abel by Cain, or the code of Lamech that promised to increase Cain’s threat of sevenfold retaliation exponentially to seventy-sevenfold (Gen. 4:15, 23-24). But an eye for an eye for an eye for a tooth for a tooth for a tooth still maintains the cycle of violence.

So how to escape? The famous phrase in Matthew 5:39 about how to respond in the face of evil has often been translated in way that is easily dismissable as totally passive kumbaya nonresistance: “Do not resist evil,” or a little better, “Do not resist the evil one.” But a far better translation recognizes the dative Greek word behind our English word “evil” not as substantive but as instrumental, and renders the phrase: “Do not resist in an evil way.”⁹ I.e., do not respond in kind. This was Paul’s take on Jesus’ teaching in Romans 12: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil.... Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.” And it fits the context perfectly: Jesus is diagnosing the vicious cycles from which traditional righteousness will not extricate us.

“Love your enemies” (Matt. 5:44) is not simply a high-minded principle, then. Jesus fleshes it out with practical guidance that offers us transforming initiatives and the promise of real-world deliverance from cycles of retribution. Examined closely in their first-century social context, offering the left cheek specifically, giving up one’s cloak in what was probably a debtor’s court, or going a second mile when a

Roman soldier pressed a subject under occupation into service, were all ways to transform the power dynamics of oppression through social creativity. Jesus was actually giving the oppressed ways to resist but not in kind, not violently, not hatefully.¹⁰ For Jesus' immediate audience these were potent, recognizable examples of the trickster smarts celebrated in the folktales of oppressed peoples of many cultures (think Br'er Rabbit), that evened the power without giving the oppressor excuses to smash them. For us they are prototypes for the creative strategies of nonviolent action we have to invent for our own historical junctures. The overarching pattern explains what is going on when any just peacemaking practice takes risks but thus takes the initiative in ways that break out of vicious cycles.

Okay, others here are explaining and offering examples of creative nonviolence. So let me lurch back around to "the Church and nonviolence." If Jesus thought through moral questions and charted his pastoral pedagogy according to this triadic pattern, we can and should to do the same.

1. "Traditional righteousness." Over the centuries, just-war theory has become our traditional righteousness. Some may wish otherwise; some may be grateful. But even those who believe Christians made a huge mistake in the fourth/fifth centuries often find themselves appealing to just-war criteria in order to urge policymakers to do better even if they can't do the best – to live up to their own highest stated principles even if they can't see their way politically to courageous and creatively nonviolent strategies. Just-war theory has gotten written into international law in ways that human rights advocates depend upon. It is often the *lingua franca* for debating matters of war in the public square, even for those with another first language. I was thus an outlier at the Rome conference when I warned against a blanket condemnation of just-war theory, and am confident that this reticence has a biblical basis in Jesus' own triadic pedagogy in the Sermon on the Mount itself. Jesus' approach was not to condemn the fourteen examples of traditional righteousness he named there, so far as they went, much less their conscientious practitioners. It was graciously to show how we can supersede traditional righteousness because it does not go far enough.

2. "Vicious cycles." It is in the diagnosis of vicious cycles, then, that the Church has already found consensus on the need for "a fresh reappraisal of war" in the modern world. It is here that we continue to build consensus despite lingering uncertainty as to whether and how to use just-war

categories to “limit the use of force by the application of moral norms.”¹¹ We have seen the result of totalitarian claims that war might issue in some thousand-year *Reich* of peace or create a socialist new man. No one seriously justifies any war as an opportunity to end all wars, the way Woodrow Wilson famously did. The best and most conscientious just-war thinkers are attending to the non-military *jus post-bellum* actions required for what they hope will achieve a longer-lasting peace. At most they argue that the danger of Mutually Assured Destruction has cemented in place a sort of static vicious cycle. But since nuclear deterrence requires the threat to break all norms of just-war theory, the Roman Catholic Church only endorsed deterrence doctrine reluctantly and provisionally, hopefully on the way disarmament – and now has said in effect that the clock has run out.¹² Do a close reading of Francis’s 2017 World Day of Peace message on nonviolence as a style of politics, therefore, and you will find multiple references to chains or cycles of violence – and thus the need to counter injustice and defend just causes without perpetuating violence.

3. “Transforming initiatives,” then, are the way to develop just peace theory and work for peace. While the prototypes we find in the Sermon on the Mount inevitably come from first-century Palestine, once we begin to recognize their dynamic, we will see their power at work even at the highest level of international affairs. I do not have time to lay out the ten realistic and “normative practices” that Stassen and his colleagues identified in their exposition of just peacemaking theory. So instead here are three words: “Nixon to China.” Whether Nixon subjectively loved Mao Tse Tung is immaterial. The manual for peacemaking that is the Sermon on the Mount is accessible and translatable even in geopolitics. For when a movement or figure we least expect does the unexpected, the mimesis that sets up vicious cycles starts to spiral off into a virtuous cycle instead. More often the unexpected comes from the apparently powerless, who as Francis noted, “resist the temptation to retaliate, [and thus] become the most credible promoters of nonviolent peacemaking.”¹³ But this power is not inaccessible anywhere on the sociopolitical map. A Christian may narrate it as the power of the gospel at work in a world that only dimly acknowledges the gospel at best. Whatever domestic and geopolitical reasons Nixon had for tapping unwittingly into that power, the Church has more and better reasons for nurturing the creativity and imagination needed to recognize openings for transforming initiatives sooner and more consistently.

That nurturing – that stepping into the breach – is where the Church should be investing its resources and taking its own risks.

Implications, then, for church unity and pastoral practice: Even if Jesus' triadic way of thinking allows for some limited use just-war categories in order to dissuade the Cains and Lamechs of the world who promise to retaliate seven and then seventy-seven fold, just-war theory cannot be the Church's overarching moral framework. If we use it at all we might better call it "just-policing"¹⁴ or speak of "violence-reduction criteria."¹⁵ In any case, as the Church seeks to apply moral norms to international affairs, lingering disagreement on the usefulness of just-war discourse need not prevent us from a shared diagnosis of vicious cycles, building on the Church's now-quite-solid consensus that even putatively just wars will not extricate us from those cycles.

The world needs transforming initiatives to build just peace. Above all, then, this is where the Church should focus and invest. We can continue to affirm those whose vocations lead them into public positions where their political options too often seem limited to what currently-accepted traditional righteousness allows. But the church will only offer them the good and foresighted pastoral guidance they need to make their hard choices and to find unexpected openings for transforming initiatives amid those hard choices if the weight of Catholic teaching is on diagnosing vicious cycles in search of transforming initiatives. Forming people with the skills, dispositions, and imaginations to find the nonviolent initiatives that will transform their historical situations must be the unmistakable focus of church teaching and the overwhelming priority in church programming.

Notes

1. Pope Francis, “Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace,” Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the celebration of the fiftieth World Day of Peace (2017), §6, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20161208_messaggio-l-giornata-mondiale-pace-2017.html. This statement is all the more striking given the pre-Vatican II ascendancy of the “manualist” tradition of moral theology and its treatment of warfare by drawing on natural law categories nearly to the exclusion of the gospels. See my commentary on the 2017 World Day of Peace message for further elaboration: “Pope Francis’ Peacebuilding Pedagogy,” *Catholic Peacebuilding Network website*, 3 January 2017, <https://nonviolencejustpeace.net/2017/01/03/pope-franciss-peacebuilding-pedagogy/>

2. Two of the casuists with the greatest influence on Catholic teaching on the ethics of war in the early modern period, Francisco de Vitoria OP and Francisco Suárez SJ, did reject Christian pacifism outright as heretical. Vitoria heroically extended just-war casuistry in order to critique the Spanish Conquest of the Americas, and for that deserves his place as a founder of modern international law. He was not so generous, however with “*isti haeretici novi*” who cite St. Paul against Christian participation in war. (Had he learned of contemporaneous Anabaptists emerging elsewhere in Europe in the 1520s and 30s?) His conclusion: “*Sed hoc est haeticum.*” See Francisco de Vitoria, *Comentarios a la Secunda Secundae de santo Tomás*, [1534–1537], ed. Vicente Beltran de Heredia, Biblioteca de Teólogos Españoles, vol. 2–6 & 17 (Salamanca: Apartado 17, 1932–52), v. 2, p. 280, commenting on Aquinas ST II-II.40.1. Suárez rejected “the assertion that it is intrinsically evil and contrary to charity to wage war” as heresy in “Disputation XIII: On War (*de Bello*),” excerpted in *The Ethics of War: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Gregory M. Reichberg, Henrik Syse, and Endre Begby (Malden, MA ; Oxford: Blackwell Pub., 2006), 339–70.

3. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, reprint ed., The Scribner Lyceum Editions Library (New York: Scribner’s, 1960); Reinhold Niebuhr, “Why the Christian Church is not Pacifist,” in *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York: Charles Scibner’s Sons, 1940), 1–32.

4. Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium*, [Dogmatic constitution on the Church] (1964), §39–42.

5. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, [Pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world] (1965), §78.

6. Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* [On the Hundredth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*], encyclical letter (1991), §23.

7. Glen H. Stassen, “The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21–7:12),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 267–308; Glen Harold Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003); Glen H. Stassen, “Healing the Rift Between the Sermon on the Mount and Christian Ethics,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 18, no. 3 (2005): 89–105; Glen H. Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006); Glen H. Stassen, “The Sermon on the Mount as Realistic Disclosure of Solid Ground,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 22, no. 1 (2009): 57–75.

8. Glen Stassen, ed., *Just Peacemaking: The New Paradigm for the Ethics of Peace and War*, 3d ed. (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008); Glen H. Stassen, “The Unity, Realism, and Obligatoriness of Just Peacemaking Theory,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23, no. 1 (2003): 171–94; Glen H. Stassen, “Just Peacemaking as Hermeneutical Key: The Need for International Cooperation in Preventing Terrorism,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 24, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2004): 171–91.

9. Glen H. Stassen, “The Fourteen Triads,” 281–82.

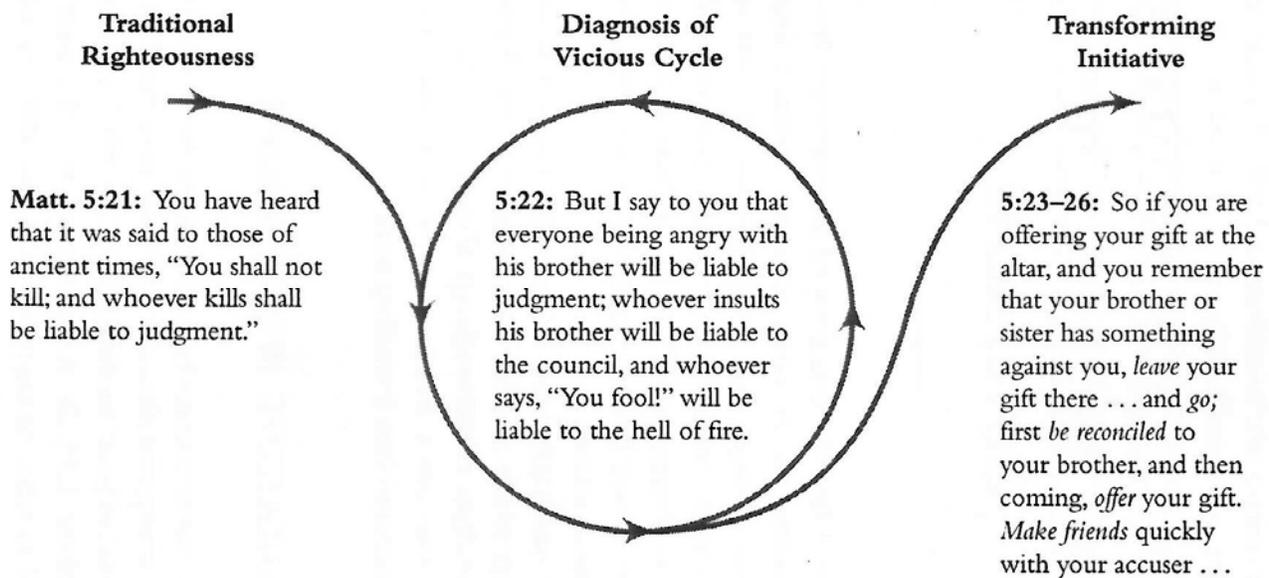
10. Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 98–111; Glen H. Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount*, 91–95.
11. Francis, “World Day of Peace Message 2017,” §6.
12. Vatican Radio, “Holy See Ratifies Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Arms” (21 September 2017), <http://www.news.va/en/news/holy-see-ratifies-treaty-on-the-prohibition-of-nuc>.
13. Francis, “World Day of Peace Message 2017,” §1.
14. Gerald W. Schlabach, ed. and lead author, *Just Policing, not War: An Alternative Response to World Violence*, with Drew Christiansen, S.J., et al. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007); Gerald W. Schlabach, “Just Policing: How War Could Cease to Be a Church-Dividing Issue,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 41, no. 3–4 (Summer-Fall 2004): 409–30; Gerald W. Schlabach, “Just Policing, not War,” *America* 189, no. 1 (7–14 July 2003): 19–21.
15. Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium*, 136–43.

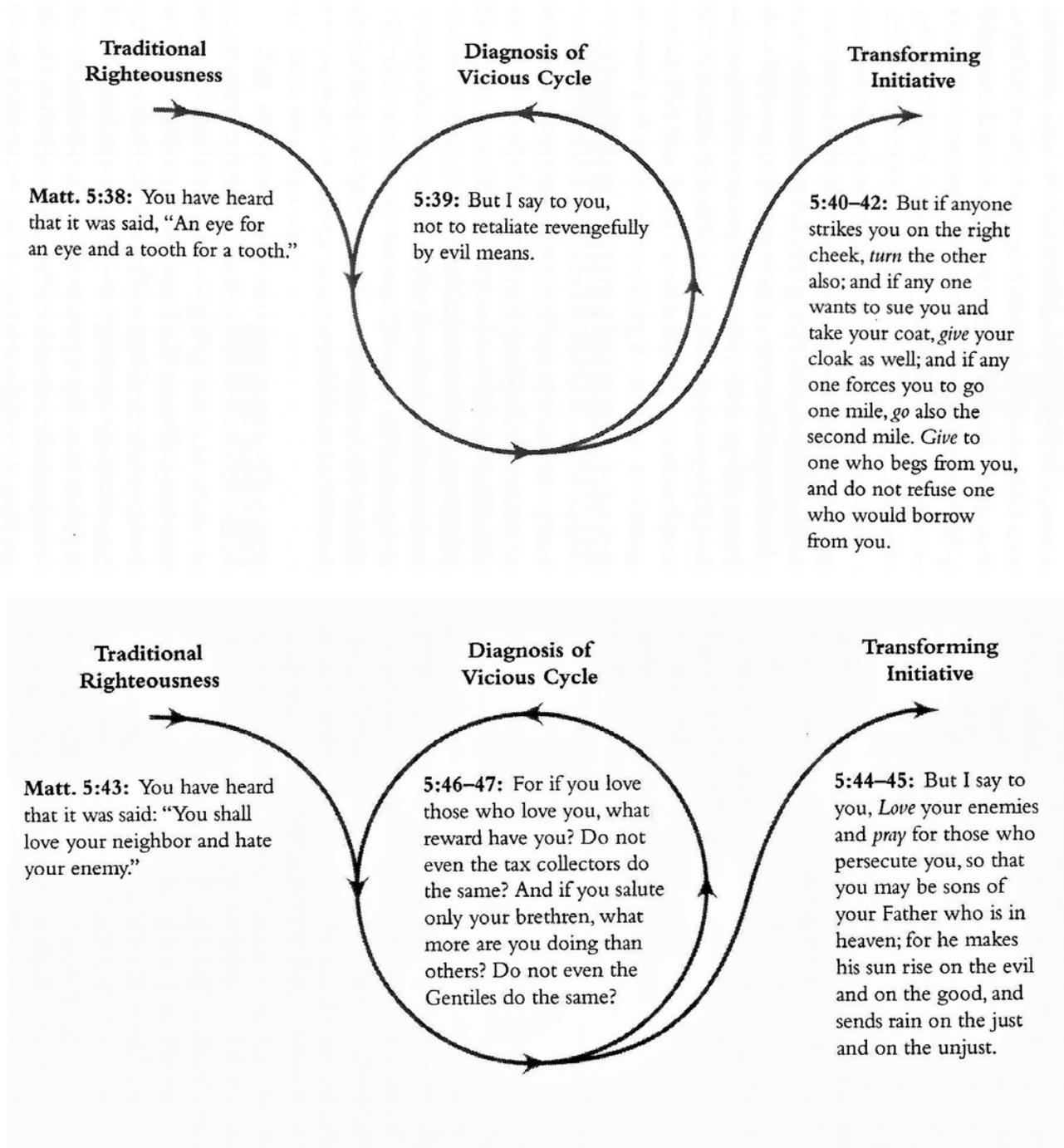
Matthew 5:21-26

21 "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'

22 But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire.

23 So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. 25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.





For detailed exegesis, see Glen H. Stassen, "The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21–7:12)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 267–308.