

Almost daily—or even more often—we can get stuck in perplexing situations. What to do...what to do? Which is the better path? Even when we are consciously trying to discern what is right and good, there can be so many different factors to be weighed, throwing us into mental debate and moral quandary. Even when the rules are rigidly fixed, the ol' black and white can get gray in a hurry.

Obviously, what a person may ask us to do—or even beg us to do—is not necessarily the best thing ... for anyone. For instance, you parents of young kids at home (and sometimes older kids NOT at home!) may be assaulted daily by the plaint *“Please, please ... puh-LEASE!!”* from the kids, usually for something that is either not good for them, or puts them in compromisingly dangerous positions, etc. And then comes the attempted manipulation *“I HATE you!”* followed often by not-so-passive aggressive door slamming when denied. Even ol' teenage “pre-Father” Glenn remembers putting his fist through a wall once. Well ... they just don't make sheetrock like they used to! Those teenage hormones are heck, aren't they?

When those in positions of authority have to make decisions, which may affect their charges, a philosophy that may be helpful is: *“The action is best which procures the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers.”* (Francis Hutcheson).

A great example we remember this holiday weekend is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Despite the vile insults, the physical violence, the blatant hatred directed at him, he advocated—and practiced—not retribution in kind, but a retribution in kindness—non-violence, urging toward doing the right regardless of opposition, etc. He very likely could have spurred a bloody revolt had he chosen a different way, but in this his own model was Jesus, who himself suffered unrighteous blows, insults, conspiracies and even death rather than digress into vengeful or hateful retaliation. Dr. King knew that the greatest good lay not in evil, but in patiently doing the good and following the example of Christ in nonviolence.

Now, in our current time the loss of civility is often noted, especially as it is so prevalent in much of our public discourse. But, one wonders, what good is such incivility doing? Whom does it really help? The availability and physical separation of social media provides forums in which one can screech across a protective electronic abyss, relatively immune from immediate and direct retaliation. No need to worry about a punch in the nose, so to speak.

But ... does it influence? Not very often; not many respond favorably to heated and unreasoned rhetoric. People complain in harsh terms, often resorting to vile unfounded accusations and connections dreamt up in their own imaginations—elevating themselves falsely in the process. And, of course, to respond snarkily or scathingly only perpetuates—and multiplies—unpleasantness.

Who, as a young person, never heard the ditty: *“Stick and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me!”* As we all know, easier said than practiced. Words and insults DO wound us—most of all when done in the presence of others, and yet even when done privately. Who has not felt bile rising when someone criticizes (even rightly) or insults? As we read in scripture: *“The blow of a whip raises a welt, but a blow of the tongue crushes the bones.”* (Sirach 28:17) And yet ... to take revenge might provide a type of immediate dark delight and satisfaction, but only until what you send around comes back around.

So, what to do? Continue in a pointless cycle of tit-for-tat, or try to nip it in the bud at the beginning. That biting response does no good and much harm. What helps the greatest number, then, is to foster care and concern for each other, and *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”* (Matthew 5:9)

And so, we again rely on the wisdom of past sages, and the wisdom of Christ. The truly admired figures of history are not those who perpetuated strife, but rather those who fostered amity, such Socrates, Gandhi, MLK Jr., and, of course, Jesus. Indeed, the Christian should constantly hear the words of Christ in his ear: *“I have given you an example,..that you also should do as I have done to you...If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.”* (John 13:15-17) And all do well to live those words of Christ: *“Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets.”* (Mathew 7:12)