

Possessing the Spirit of Non- Retaliation

5:38 "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.'

5:39 But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.

5:40 If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also.

5:41 Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two.

5:42 Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you.

The Jewish people heard it said, " an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" (Ex. 21:23-25; Lev.24:20; Deut. 19:21). Exact retribution (punishment that matches the crime) is the foundation for justice. "An eye for an eye" meant that the punishment was exactly the same as the crime, and when justice is enacted speedily and fairly it benefits society.

To some modern readers of the Bible "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" sounds barbaric, but this strict form of law had a double effect of defining justice and restraining revenge; it assured the victim that justice would be met and it assured the wrong doer that the punishment would be no more than deserved (Stott, 104). This then prevented inter-tribal warfare and feuds that often begin through the escalation of violence when seeking retaliation.

The punishment of "an eye for an eye" was not to be carried out by individuals, but the magistrates and the judicial system. It was designed to take vengeance out of the hands of private persons and commit it to the authorities.

The simplicity of this law protected the weak from the strong and the peaceful from the violent. It prevented the rich or the powerful from escaping the punishment that was due them.

However, in Jesus' day exact retribution had become an excuse to justify retaliation rooted in bitterness, vengeance, and malice; it was being used to accomplish the very thing it was instituted to abolish – personal revenge.

Here Jesus' teaching moves even further from the spirit of the OT law than His previous examples. His response is radical for it tells His followers not to resist an evil person (5:39) and to "Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you (5:42)." One is not to even stand up for his or her own rights.

Here more than anywhere in this section we need to remind ourselves that Jesus' aim is not to establish a new and more demanding set of rules to supplant those of the scribes and Pharisees. It is to establish a "greater righteousness," a different understanding of how we should live as the people of God, an alternative set of values. In place of the principle of retribution He sets nonresistance; in place of the defense of legal rights He sets uncalculating generosity; in place of concern for oneself He sets concern for the other. The disciple may be forced to conclude that in an imperfect human society Jesus' illustrations of these principles could not work as literal rules

of conduct, that unlimited generosity to beggars would not only undermine the economic order but also in the end do no good to the beggars themselves. But instead of therefore dismissing Jesus' teaching as starry-eyed utopianism, a proper response to this challenging section is to ask in what practical ways Jesus' radical principles *can* be set to work in our very different world. Our answers will vary, but if they are true to Jesus' teaching they will represent an essentially non-self-centered approach to ethics which puts the interests of the other before personal rights or convenience. We should note also, however, that a willingness to forgo one's own rights and even to allow oneself to be insulted and imposed on is not incompatible with a firm stand for justice in principle for the rights of others. (France, 217-218)

How are these statements to be taken?

Jesus' comments are not just doctrine placed outside of a historical context; they were directed toward the evils of His day. While universal in their application, they need to be understood in the context in which they appear. Jesus is not speaking in absolutes, but is still addressing the difference between internal and external righteousness (see notes on Matthew 5:20). He is stating the principle that for those who desire to enter the kingdom of God it is better to willfully endure a greater wrong than to possess a vengeful spirit or harbor resentment. Jesus lays out an ethical approach which simply sets aside the legal considerations of the law, and in fact, goes far beyond the law. "The 'fulfillment' of the law (v. 17) here consists of leaving it behind in favor of something of a different order all together, the righteousness of the kingdom of heaven" (France, 218).

Four illustrations bring this out:

① **5:39 "whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also"**

To be slapped in the face was considered a great personal insult which had legal ramifications. In Jewish law (not the OT) a slap from the back of the hand was more serious and would entail double-damages (France, 220). The punishment could range from a small fine to cutting off an ear, depending on the parties involved. But to seek justice through the law for such an insult is wrong for the disciple of Christ. Jesus Himself demonstrated the proper attitude toward such insults (Isa.50:6; Lk. 23:33, 34; I Pet.2:19-23). A follower of Christ, like Christ Himself, should prefer to suffer the same insult again than to seek that to which he is legally entitled.

② **5:40 "If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also"**

Jesus' second example involves a lawsuit. In this example He refers to the inner and outer garment which was worn by all. A tunic was the inner garment, like a long shirt that reached a little below the knee, but on dress occasions reached to the ground (Broadus, 120). The cloak (coat) was the outer garment - either a robe or a shawl depending on what the person liked. The outer garment was also used by the poor as a covering at night (Broadus, 120). The outer garment was an inalienable possession according to the law (Ex. 22:26; Deut. 24:13), and if taken, had to be returned by sunset.

In this extreme case the believer is being sued for all he owns - even his shirt would be taken from him. Instead of reacting in anger and spite, the disciple should have an attitude that is ready to give even more than the law demanded (or what the opponent dared not claim), even to the point of giving up his outer garment as well (1 Cor. 6:7). Rather than harbor a sinful attitude against God and others, it would be better to give up all (Broadus, 120).

③ **5:41** *"Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two."*

In this example, Jesus is most likely referring to the practice of the Roman soldiers whereby they could demand a citizen to carry luggage for them a prescribed distance. The Jews were already subjugated to Roman rule at no choice of their own, suffering at the harsh treatment of others. Such a practice brought a hateful or vengeful attitude (Broadus, 120). Instead of feeling resentment for the imposition, a Christian should be willing to double the distance and accept the responsibility cheerfully. To do this for anyone is remarkable, but to do it for an enemy is unheard of (France, 222). This not only illustrates the degree to which we should be willing to give up our rights, but also prepares us for the command in verse 44 to love our enemies.

④ **5:42** *"Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you."*

Jesus' last example demands giving and lending that is cheerful and willing. Giving requires interest free loans (Exo. 22:25; Lev. 25:37; Deut. 23:19), but also a generous spirit (Deut. 15:7-11; Ps. 37:26; 112:5).

Jesus is not attempting to deal with the willingness or foolishness in lending money to everyone (Prov. 11:15; 17:18; 22:26). Instead, He is demonstrating the need of a generous spirit (Deut. 15:7-11; Ps.37:26; 112:5). Those who claim to know Christ should not refuse help to people in need. Luke 6:30 says, "Give to everyone who asks of you, and whoever takes away what is yours, do not demand it back."

Thus, Jesus deals with a deeper form of righteousness than simple conformity to outward rules. The righteousness that Jesus demands is from the heart. Those who ask, "What's in it for me?" or "What can I get out of it?" only reveal an attitude that is foreign to Christ's thinking. The believer has no right to act in a manner that is inconsistent with love and purity. Followers of Jesus have renounced every personal right. To cling to their "own rights" is to cease to follow Him (Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 157).

In SUM: The words of Jesus rule out all retaliation, or any action based solely on convenience or personal safety. We are not to act based on what benefits us the most. We are to live for others and for the glory of God (cf. 1 Tim 6:1; Titus 2:4-5, 6-8). That's the point of Matthew 5:38-42.

The Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate failed in his efforts to suppress Christianity largely because of the distinctive living he found among Christians. He told his officials, "We ought to be ashamed. Not a beggar is to be found among the Jews, and those godless Galileans (the Christians) feed not only their own people but ours as well, whereas our people receive no assistance whatever from us."

Wouldn't it be wonderful if the world had the same testimony about us today?