

Turning the Other Cheek (Matt. 5:38-42)

Introduction

These may be some of the most familiar words of the Sermon on the Mount. Some have used these words to justify pacifism; others to advocate for revolution. What do these words mean? Christ is explaining what a Christian is, and what the Christian life looks like. Here He is answering the question: what must we do when we experience personal injury.

Instruction

Jesus refers to the rule of an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21). This rule called the *lex talionis* (law of retaliation) and to many in our society seems cruel and conjures up disturbing images of maiming and torture. But the purpose of this law was to limit revenge and retaliation (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21). It was meant to “prevent excessive punishment based on personal vengeance and angry retaliation” (Gen. 4:23-24). It taught that the punishment must fit the crime. The Pharisees had turned this law as a charter for revenge and mandate for revenge. The Lord instructs us differently (Prov. 25:21; 24:29). Therefore Christ says (vs. 39): “But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil.”

Matthew Henry: “This does not repeal the law of self-preservation, and the care we are to take of our families; we may avoid evil, and may resist it, so far as is necessary to our own security; but we must not render evil for evil, must not bear a grudge, nor avenge ourselves, nor study to be even with those that have treated us unkindly, but we must go beyond them by forgiving them.”

J.C. Ryle: “The Lord Jesus forbids everything like an unforgiving and revengeful spirit.... A readiness to resent injuries, a quickness in taking offence, a quarrelsome and contentious disposition, a keenness in asserting our rights,--all, all are contrary to the mind of Christ. The world may see no harm in these habits of mind; but they do not become the character of the Christian.”

Illustrations

Christ gives 4 illustrations that a Christian should patiently yield to those who are unkind and hard rather than give way to vengeance and retaliation.

1. **When it concerns your dignity.** Vs. 39: “Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.” This blow with the back of the hand is more an insult than a violent crime. When insults come, let your response be one with meekness and grace, as the LJ responded (Is. 50:6-8; 1 Pet. 2:23)

2. **When it concerns your property.** Vs. 40: “And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also.” Christ envisions someone taking you to court. He seeks compensation by taking your clothing. Spurgeon: “It is better to lose a suit of clothes than to involve yourself in a suit of law.”
3. **When it concerns your liberty.** “Vs. 41: “And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain.” Roman law gave Roman soldiers the right to force a civilian to carry his pack for a mile. That is how Simon of Cyrene was forced to carry the cross of Christ (Mk. 15:21). Christ says: don’t just walk the mile, and dump it and run away, but go another mile. It would give opportunity to explain why.
4. **When it concerns your money.** Vs 42: “Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away.” Christ is saying that grace makes us open our hands to give to him that needs (Eph. 4:28). This can be challenging because we can be so attached to our goods and possessions. “Let goods... go.”

Implications

It shows the responsibility of the Christian. What a call! In the face of criticism and insults, which stings and hurts, and our natural tendency is to retaliate, the Lord Jesus says: don’t retaliate. Let them criticize, and let them do it again. When others make unfair demands, be prepared to go the 2nd mile when everything inside of you is screaming for rest and recognition. Take up your cross and follow Him.

It shows the security in God. Why can a Christian respond like this? Because his security is not in his circumstances, or his possessions, but in God through Christ. Thomas Brooks: “You are his picked, culled, prime instruments which he will make use of to carry on his best and greatest work against his worst and greatest enemies in these latter days.” Anchored in God, looking for greater and better things.

It gives testimony to our world. How different from the natural man. People are nasty, vengeful, mean-spirited, and here is a Christian who turns the other cheek, goes the extra mile. It is a witness that the Spirit uses.

It shows the necessity of grace. What Christ speaks of can only be known through His saving grace. It shows our need for the new birth and union and communion with Christ. When God works His grace, Abraham lets his nephew Lot have first choice; Joseph embraced and kissed his brothers who had wronged him; David does not try to take revenge on King Saul who is persecuting him; Elisha feeds the Assyrian army; and Stephen prays for those stoning him to death.

Discussion Questions

1. *Why are we so inclined to say when someone takes something from us: “Give it back!”*
2. *A hymn-writer put it this way: “And a life of self-renouncing love is a life of liberty.” What does this mean?*

3. *Whom do we reflect in our life and in the face of animosity and selfishness?*