

You Said, But I Say – Part 8

“You have heard that it was said, 'AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.' But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone wants to sue you, and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. And whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you.” – Matthew 5:38-42

From our last article we observed that the scribes and Pharisees had extended the Old Testament principle of justified retribution under the jurisdiction of civil law, to the realm of personal relationships. Thus they confused the Scriptures to teach and justify personal revenge, in direct contradiction to God's instructions: “You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people” (Lev. 19:18). To give “life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe” (Ex. 21:22-25; Lev. 24:19,20; Deut. 19:21), expressed the principle of ‘lex talionis’. In the words of John R.W. Stott, ‘lex talionis’ established “the foundation of justice, specifying the punishment which a wrong-doer deserved, (and) limited the compensation of his victim to an exact equivalent and no more (by) defining justice and restraining revenge.” Jesus gives four mini-illustrations of one who seeks to do injury by (1) striking the face, (2) prosecution at law, (3) commandeering service and (4) begging money or possessions. These four deal with basic human rights: dignity, security, liberty, and property.

“Do not resist him who is evil.” This could be better translated “Do not take revenge on someone who wrongs you.” This does not teach, as some have maintained, that we are not to take a stand against evil, and that evil should be allowed to run its course. Scripture commands us to “Resist the devil” (Ja. 4:7, see also 1 Pe. 5:9), and to “take up the full armor of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm” (Eph. 6:13). Jesus Himself resisted evil in the temple when he found His Father's house had been turned into a house of merchandise and a den of thieves (Jn. 2:13-17). Jude tells us to “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints”, implying that we must resist false teaching and be diligently aware of those who would adulterate basic doctrine.

Not only are we to refrain from returning evil for evil: “Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men” (Rom. 12:17, 1Thess. 5:15, 1Pe. 3:9), but we are additionally instructed “Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Lu. 6:28) and “Bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not” (Rom. 12:14). In the words of Charles Spurgeon, “We are to be as the anvil when bad men are the hammers.”

“But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also.” By the very fact that we belong to God, we will be mistreated: “All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2Tim. 3:12). Kingdom citizens are to be non-avenging, non-retaliatory, humble and meek. By doing so we “heap coals of fire on [their] head[s]” (Rom 12:20, Prov. 25:22), ie, shame the evil-doer into repentance: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21). This portion speaks of leaving the defense and protection of our dignity in God's hands. The Apostle Peter's words are appropriate here: “For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, Who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in his mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously” (1Pe. 2:20-23).

“And if anyone wants to sue you, and take your shirt, let him have your coat also.” Jesus is saying rather than offend or produce hard feelings, be willing to surrender money, possessions or whatever may be considered valuable. Obviously it could be a matter that a court would settle, but a voluntary relinquishment is desirable. This does not speak of yielding every possession indiscriminately, but if guilty of wrong doing, it speaks of our attitude to offer even more to show our regret and to demonstrate that we are not resentful or bitter against the one we may have offended. As Christians, we have a freedom that the world does not know, and we have a greater possession: “His divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness” (2 Pe. 1:3).

“And whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two.” Jesus is referring to the sacrifice of our basic liberties. In the Roman culture, a soldier could command a civilian to carry his equipment for approximately one mile, which instigated hatred. Rather than refuse or retaliate, Jesus says surrender your freedom. William Barclay comments: “What Jesus is saying is, “Don't be always thinking of your liberty to do as you like; be always thinking of your duty and your privilege to be of service to others. When a task is laid on you, even if the task is unreasonable and hateful, don't do it as a grim duty to be resented; do it as a service to be gladly rendered. The Christian is not concerned only to help, even when the demand for help is discourteous, unreasonable and tyrannical.”

“Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you.” Again, it is not the teaching of this text to respond to every foolish, selfish request made of us. There is a strong implication in this part of the verse that suggests that the person making the request does indeed have a genuine need. Not to give when we have the ability to meet the need is disobedience: “But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?” (1Jn. 3:17) Additionally, James says, “If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,' and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?” (Ja. 2:15-16) To the Christian it should be remembered, “Let each one do just as he has purposed in his heart; not grudgingly or under compulsion; for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7). “Giving is the language of loving,” John H. Jowett once said. “Indeed, it has no other speech. 'God so loved that he gave!' Love finds its very life in giving itself away.”

Consider Abraham who gave the best land to his nephew Lot. Or Joseph, who kissed the brothers who terribly wronged him. David, who did not take advantage of the opportunity to take Saul's life. Stephen, who prayed for those stoning him. Our Lord, who prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Lu. 23:34).

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