

Retaliation and Love

Matthew 5:38-48

"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 the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

"You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

The principle of "eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth" was a provision in God's Law that helped ensure that fair and just restitution was achieved (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; and Deut. 19:21). The idea was that the governing authorities would rightly judge disputes between citizens of Israel and then dispense justice based on the eye for an eye principle. The idea was to restrain people from all manner of personal desires for vengeance. However, in Jesus' day many, especially the Pharisees, treated this concept as an excuse to justify self-centered retaliation. Likewise, they took the command to love your neighbor (Lev. 19:18) and added to it the idea of hating your enemy, which was also unbiblical. Jesus' teaching in this section of the Sermon on the Mount served to show the true meaning of God's Law on these matters.

A Call to Die to Self

In vv. 38-42 Jesus laid out for His listeners a principle of self-denial and humility that eliminates pride and self-glory from the pursuit of justice. He is calling His disciples to not make their personal rights the basis for their relationship with others, even in relationships with those who are evil.

There is to be in us no spirit of retaliation. His first example of offenses we might experience is one of an insulting, open-handed slap. The second is one of the potentially embarrassing loss in court of one's tunic. The third finds its context in a Roman soldier commissioning someone to carry supplies, which was the soldier's right by Roman law. The eye for an eye principle might have been used to say one can, even should, return the slap, appeal the loss of the tunic, or rebel against the rule of Rome. Instead, Jesus calls for a different way - the way of humility, the way of the Gospel, the way of the cross. He calls us not to save face and to reclaim lost honor, but to accept the second insult, to multiply the material loss, and to go the extra mile. He points the way for us to count others as more significant than ourselves, and for us to put their interests above our own (Phil. 2:3-4). By treating them in this way we glorify God and we show them the effect of the Gospel of Jesus in us.

The call to self-denial is radical. That being said, taking all of Scripture into account, we conclude that Jesus' is not saying the Christian never has any recourse for justice. Scripture affirms, for example, that the state holds the authority to keep peace (Rom. 13:1-7). As such, Christians can rightly appeal to the proper authorities for justice. Scripture also teaches the value of human life. The state must always, rightly resist, by word and action, evil that threatens or devalues life. There are times and circumstances when we also, as individual Christians, should do the same. However, our pursuit should always be for true justice, not self-centered vengeance.

There is to be in us no spirit of withholding good from others. Jesus calls us to give to the one who begs and to make a loan to the one who needs to borrow from us. We have to take the totality of Scripture's teaching into account here as well. We must keep in mind other laws and principles about giving wisely so as not to enable a sluggard or drunkard. Knowing that, what we see here is that Jesus is calling His people, Kingdom citizens that we are, to *have a spirit of generosity toward those in need*. We are not to be selfish with our time, talents, or treasures. Rather, in the way of Christ we are to give liberally of ourselves and from our possessions to those in need, knowing that we are but stewards of it all, and that it was freely given to us by God.



We must take stock and search our hearts to rightly address our sinful selfishness in the face of insult, injury, or inconvenience. Martin Lloyd-Jones shows us some good questions to ask of ourselves to help identify selfishness.

Whenever I notice in myself a reaction of self-defense, or a sense of annoyance or grievance, or a feeling that I have been hurt or wronged and am suffering an injustice - the moment I feel this defensive mechanism coming into play, I must just quietly face myself and ask the following questions. 'Why exactly does this thing upset me? Why am I grieved by it? What is my real concern at this point? Am I really concerned for some principle of justice and righteousness? Am I really moved and disturbed because I have some true cause of heart or, let me face it honestly, is it just myself? Is it just this horrible, foul self-centeredness and self-concern, this morbid condition into which I have got? Is it nothing but an unhealthy pride?'

Love Your Enemies

Jesus' teaching that the command to love our neighbors extends to our enemies would have been a shocking word in His day. The divide between Jew and Gentile in particular was one full of bitterness and contempt. How could a Jew love a Gentile? Jesus showed that the people of the kingdom would extend love even that far, in keeping with God's own display of love by common grace to the good and evil alike (v. 45). We can glean from this that:

- Showing love to our enemies is a display of our status as sons of the heavenly Father (v. 45).
- One way to show love to our enemies is to pray for those who persecute God's people (v. 44).
- Another way to show love to those who are not like us is by valuing them enough to extend a dignified and gracious greeting to them and not only to our brothers (v. 47).

Jesus' point is that showing love to those we already love, and kindness to those who are most like us, is nothing unique. Even the degenerate and unbelievers do that. We are called to do more than others (v. 47). The Gospel tells us we cannot do more than anyone else if we do it in our own strength. We are called to be perfect as our Father is perfect (v. 48). The Gospel reminds us that we cannot be perfect (blameless) on our own. It is only in Christ that we who were once children of wrath have been made alive (Eph. 2:3-4), thus becoming perfect sons of God by grace through faith. It is only in Jesus, who humbly took on flesh and died on the cross (Phil. 2:5-8) while we were still sinners (Rom. 5:8), that we can love our enemies. We are able to love them because He first loved us when we were still His enemies. We are declared perfect because the spotless Lamb shed His blood for us. What's more, we are growing in His perfection by the Spirit who sanctifies us.

Discussion Questions and Application

- ✦ What are some common ways that personal insults are delivered today, in our culture? What affect, if any, have social media and the internet had on our propensity as a culture to deliver insults, to be (overly?) sensitive to insults, and to be quick to retaliate? Do Christians stand out as different from the world in this regard? Why or why not?
- ✦ Do you tend to respond to insult, injury, and inconvenience from a self-centered spirit of retaliation or one of humble self-denial in Christ? Why? Lloyd-Jones' questions (see above) may be helpful in identifying selfish motives of the heart.
- ✦ What is your initial response to Jesus' call for us to give to the one who begs and to loan to the one who would borrow? How does Christ's grace enable you to give generously of yourself to meet the needs of others?
- ✦ As Christians we should not strive to make enemies, but we may still have them. What are some examples of tangible and practical ways that we can live out the Gospel by loving our enemies? What are some of the hopeful effects that can come from extending a compassionate and humble greeting to those who are "not our brothers"?
- ✦ Pray for those who persecute the Church. Ask Him to grow within you by the Spirit a humble, Christ-like heart.
- ✦ Greet someone (a neighbor, co-worker, etc.) in the name of Christ who is "not your brother."

