

Possessing the Spirit of Non- Retaliation

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.

In response to these abuses, Jesus 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)."

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.

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. But to seek vengeance 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 retaliate in like manner.

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 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 it was taken it 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, even to the point of giving up his outer garment as well (I 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.

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), 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.

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 but we are to become the kind of person who is utterly free from these things to live for others and for the glory of God and the testimony of our faith (cf. I 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?