

Sermon Notes of Rev Dr Ivor J.W.Oakley (13-8-2000 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Matthew 5 v 38-42

Additional reading Romans 13:1-14

Do not resist an evil person

Introduction

Now we come to the fifth illustration of the kind of righteousness which the Lord requires from his followers, the fifth antithesis. It has caused great controversy in interpretation. Quite diverse views are held. Luther spoke of a “crazy saint” who let mice nibble at him, and refused to kill them on the basis of these words in Matthew. He preferred to suffer.

19th and 20th century arguments for getting rid of law courts, magistrates, judges, police force and army, have been based on these verses. And in times of war, conscientious objectors have repeatedly turned to this passage to back up their refusal to join the forces and fight. Some have argued that basically all human beings are sensible and loving. If they see people being non-violent, they would not dream of killing those who are trying to serve them. How optimistic! They argue that all criminals and robbers hate evil and love good like the rest of us!

The key to the meaning of this passage is to keep to its context and wider context of Scripture. So we follow the usual procedure. Go back into the Old Testament and see what was taught there. Then see how the situation changed in the first century. Then look at the Lord’s teaching and see what it means and what it does not mean.

Old Testament background

You have heard that it was said ‘Eye for eye and tooth for tooth’ (Matthew 5:38). Jesus is quoting from Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, Deuteronomy 19:21. This injunction was given to the judges of Israel. There was to be exact retribution in administering justice. This injunction limited and restrained revenge. It not only laid down the basic principle to be followed in the law courts, but it also improved the chaotic situation that existed beforehand. Previously if one tooth was knocked out, revenge meant knocking out every tooth in the other man’s head (both jaws). If one eye was injured, both of the other man’s eyes would be injured in return.

Therefore this was a restraining principle – one eye for one eye, one tooth for one tooth. This also was meant to stop family feuds where violence stopped at nothing, and could lead to a whole family being wiped out. By this law, only the guilty were to be punished, and the punishment had to be a strict equivalent, and no more. Therefore it was a merciful law. It also meant the private person was not to take the law into their own hands but the matter was to be dealt with through the law courts, where a judge would hear the case and assess the punishment.

By the time of Jesus, this law was often not carried out literally. In many cases, money payment was given out if you were injured. Damage was paid for, except in the case of murder. So ‘eye for and eye’ was a just and merciful law in the Old

Testament. Also found in Roman and Greek law, and the famous law code of Hammurabi 2285-2244BC.

Perversion by Scribes and Pharisees

They, like so many people when they look at the Bible, totally ignored the context and twisted this law to suit their own ends. They forgot it was meant for the law courts. They used it to justify private revenge. And then they went further. They not only said it allowed revenge but that it was a duty to insist on revenge. So a law intended to restrain personal revenge became twisted to encourage revenge.

Teaching of Jesus on the subject

Jesus says **Do not resist an evil person** (Matthew 5:39) NIV and NKJV. The AV translates τω πονηρω as **Resist not evil**. The Greek ending suits both masculine and neuter, so both translations are correct. The problem with the AV translation is that we *are* to resist evil, especially in the person of the Devil and all his evil powers, C.f. the armour of God. The NIV translation is better because it refers to the man who wrongs you, he who is wrong, and whose conduct is wrong. Despite this, we must not retaliate and take revenge on him. Jesus is not saying that there is no place for retribution and doing justice, but that this is the responsibility of the law courts and judgement of God himself. He is talking of personal relationships, where there is no place for private revenge.

He is not referring to the law courts and magistrates and judges and capital punishment. He is not referring to the police force whose task it is to protect innocent law-abiding people and punish wrongdoers, and preserve law and order. He is not referring to military force which, when used properly, acts like police force on international scene. In a world where evil prevails, justice has to be exercised, evil men have to be restrained, law and order has to be preserved. Society and the world cannot tolerate bullies and hooligans. Love for others demands that they are restrained in the interests of innocent people.

We have a duty to the state to **Give to Caesar what is Caesar's** (Mark 12:17). Paul reminds us that the powers that be were ordained by God (Romans 13:1), and therefore we are to be subject to them. **Submit... to every authority instituted among men: whether to kings... or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right** (1 Peter 2:13-14). Therefore we need to uphold the state in its work of upholding law and order, and ensuring justice is done.

Martin Luther said we all have different roles in life. As a person, we have personal relationships with people. But we also have other roles - fathers, judges, citizens, etc. and as such we have duties to perform in these offices. The father has to punish his child. The citizen has to uphold law and order, and the judge who has been entrusted by God with the authority to punish evil, must restrain the evil man. But in personal relationships, things are different. We are not to retaliate in word or deed in private affairs, not to try to get our own back, not to take the law into our own hands.

In church affairs we are not to retaliate if someone is rude or unkind. But if a person is harming the fellowship or the cause of Christ, sometimes there is the need to speak up – but no personalizing and no insult and injury.

Commit our cause to God and leave the matter with him. **It is mine to avenge. I will repay, says the Lord** (Romans 12:19). **If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone** (Romans 12:18).

From our earliest days, we know a desire for revenge. But Jesus teaches a new spirit of non-resentment and non-retaliation on a personal level when struck or insulted. And he gave us a supreme example of what it meant. **When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate. When he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly** (1 Peter 2:23).

Four vivid examples of Jesus' teaching in practice

Jesus did not leave his teaching up in the air. He gives four vivid pictures. They are not to be taken as crude literalism. He is not encouraging anarchy or robbery or violence or nudity or social parasites. Interpret in spirit, not in letter. They are not rigid rules for all occasions, but vivid pictures of the non-vindictive spirit in action.

(a) Turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:39)

When struck on the right cheek (i.e. worst insult of all. Since most men are right handed, to strike another on the right cheek means using the back of the hand – which was twice as insulting as using the palm, according to the Jewish Rabbis), give him the other also. Therefore don't retaliate, even if faced with the most calculated insult.

Billy Bray, Cornish Evangelist, and also a great boxer. Feared by one man before his conversion. Decided to get even when he heard Bray was now a Christian. He struck Bray. Bray could have knocked him flat, but instead he said "May God forgive you as I do". The man endured such agony of mind and spirit that this led to his conversion. He knew what Bray was capable of, but saw the power of grace in Bray's life, his spirit of non-retaliation, even in the face of blows, insults and lies.

This does not mean violent men should be allowed to do as they please. They should be brought to justice and the law upheld. The good of society and of the criminal himself requires that. But we are not to be concerned with our personal honour and dignity. This picture is not of a doormat or weakling, but of a strong man controlling self with strong love for others, so that he is not mastered by personal revenge.

(b) Giving cloak as well as tunic (Matthew 5:40)

χιτων means tunic, or long, sack-like inner garment made of cotton or linen. Even the poorest would have several. The cloak was a great blanket-like outer garment, worn as a robe by day and serving as a blanket at night. If the outer garment was taken in pledge, it had always to be given back at nightfall according to law (Exodus 22:26-27). Jesus was not advocating nudity, but is saying that we are not to stand on our legal rights and insist on getting our pound of flesh. This has to be balanced with other side of the picture – **If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault** (Matthew 18:15ff). Paul and Silas said the magistrate who had beaten them uncondemned should come and take them out of prison (Acts 16:37). We should stand

firm for our principles. We have a right to be concerned with righteousness, justice and truth. Law has to be upheld, but we are not to stand on our rights and personal property and dignity. Graciousness of spirit must be shown.

(c) Going second mile (Matthew 5:41).

Roman officials had the right to require a Jew to act as guide or carry soldier's baggage for one mile. Hence Simon of Cyrene was forced to carry the cross of Jesus. Jesus is saying we should go two miles, i.e. go beyond what is required. Meet oppression with kindness and willing service. Do not sulk or protest or criticise.

(d) Give to him who asks (Matthew 5:42).

If this was taken literally, we would soon be bankrupt. Also, indiscriminate giving is one of greatest social evils and injures the character of the beggar. We are not to encourage frauds and professional beggars and layabouts. **If a man will not work, he shall not eat** (2 Thess. 3:10). N.B. Context is do not retaliate. If our enemy is in need, we must not refuse to help and assist him. **If anyone has material possessions and sees brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?** (1 John 3:17-18). Bear in mind the first century background of no pension schemes, unemployment benefit, or national assistance.

Conclusion

So we have this very controversial passage. The key to its interpretation is to consider the context and wider context of the whole bible. Interpret in spirit and not strict letter of law – else end in absurdities.

The Lord is not talking about law courts, magistrates, police force, justice and maintaining law and order and proper use of army. These things are dealt with elsewhere in Scripture. It is clear that part of our duty as Christian citizens is to be as loyal to the state as we can be, to uphold and maintain these things. Wrongs should be righted. Evil should not go unrestrained. Take strong stand for principles.

The Lord is talking about self in all these things: concern for my rights, my property, my dignity, and my importance. Concern with self is great mark of natural unconverted man and is under the surface with the Christian because he still has old nature within. How often Jesus emphasises there is no place for self – pleasing self, living for self, glorifying self, concerned with self, defending self, getting even with someone insulting self. Self has no place in Christian life. It is the old nature, which is dominated by me. By the new birth, we have a new centre, the Lord; his will, his purposes, his glory. When that is the case we shall speak up for law and order and justice – but to please him and not because of self-interest.

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature (Galatians 5:24), i.e. self-dominated nature. Henceforth the Christian prays that Christ might rule. He has a new centre, so he lives by the spirit, keeps in step with the spirit, and is daily filled with the spirit (Galatians 5:16, 25, Ephesians 5:18). These teachings of Jesus are meaningful to the man who loves Christ, but confusing for the world and the non-Christian. Hence we need to be born again in order to understand and live the kind of life Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount. Someone once said - the Christian conqueror is first of all a conquered man.