

Go the Second Mile – Jesus’ Teaching on Non-Retaliation

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Christianity is a doing religion. We are not saved in order to become statues in a museum; rather, we are saved to become active doers of God’s will in this world (ref. James 1:22). It should be no wonder then, that our Lord so often commanded those who would be His followers to “Go!” In this lesson let’s consider Jesus command to “*Go the Second Miles.*”

Typically, when we talk about someone going the extra mile we mean a person has gone above and beyond what is expected. So, someone might say, “I like doing business with that company. They always go the extra mile to make sure I’m satisfied.” Or we might apply it to a person and say, “They are so nice, always going the extra mile for others.” While it is okay to use the expression this way, it is not the way Jesus used it. Rather, than describing superior customer service or exceptional friendship, our Lord was illustrating His standard for non-retaliation against an evil person. Let’s uncover this teaching together as we go through Matthew 5:38-42.

1. CORRECTING MISCONCEPTIONS

- a. “*You have heard it said*” (v. 38a). Our passage begins with a familiar phrase, “*You have heard it said...*” Our Lord used this expression (or something similar) in His Sermon on the Mount to introduce a teaching the people had heard from the scribes and Pharisees (cf. vv. 20, 21, 27, 31, 33, 43).
 - i. In this case it was, “*You have heard it said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*” (v. 38b). Stated explicitly three times in the Law of Moses, (Exodus 21:22-25; Leviticus 24:17-22; Deuteronomy 19:15-21) this phrase was part of a longer list of equivalents, “*Life for a life... burn for a burn... foot for a foot...*” and so on. In context, the intent of this law was to establish guidance for judicial sentencing when a crime had been committed.
 - ii. However, by our Lord’s time the law was misapplied to say that a person was right, if not obligated, to retaliate against a wrong perpetrated on them. This mindset then created a viscous cycle of reciprocal hate and violence. Our Lord desired something else.
- b. “*But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil*” (v. 39a). Following the previously established form (cf. vv. 22, 28, 32, 34, 44), Jesus counters the prevalent teaching of the day with His own ethic that is to govern the actions of His disciples.
 - i. His position is shockingly radical; not only is a disciple to not retaliate against evil, but neither was he or she to resist the “*one who is evil.*”
 - ii. Furthermore, He advocates an active form of nonresistance; one that unselfishly gives up one’s honor, rights and resources in deference to the evil person.

2. JESUS’ RADICAL ETHIC OF NONRETALIATION:

- a. First He said, “*If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also*” (v. 39b).

- i. In a culture that took honor and shame seriously, to slap someone on the cheek was a public insult (cf. Job 16:20; Lamentations 3:30). However, by identifying the *“right cheek,”* Jesus envisages something even more insulting, a backhanded slap by a right handed person. In this scenario, an evil person is seeking to publicly humiliate the disciple by shamefully slapping them.
 - ii. What is the disciple’s response supposed to be in this case? Willingly accept the humiliating insult without retaliating; even going so far as offering the left cheek as an object of insult as well. In this way, the believer *“Repay[s] no one evil for evil”* (Romans 12:17).
- b. Second He said, *“If anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well”* (v. 40). The Lord illustrated His point with the picture a poor man who was being maliciously exploited by an evil man
 - i. Clothing was regularly used by the poor as collateral for loans (cf. Exodus 22:25-27; Deuteronomy 24:10-13). In this situation, the poor man does not countersue or seek revenge. Rather, he is to do the unthinkable and give the man his heavier, more valuable outer garment. Under the Law of Moses, it was an inalienable right for a person to keep their cloak no matter what (cf. Exodus 22:25-27; Deuteronomy 24:10-13).
 - ii. So, what an opponent could not claim, the disciple was to freely offer, even at the cost of leaving himself with nothing to wear. Thus, the believer allows himself to be wronged and defrauded rather than seeking vengeance (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:7).
- c. Third He said, *“If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles”* (v. 41). In this scenario, Jesus presented a situation involving the compulsory service exacted by the Romans - commandeering was an ancient practice imposed by ruling governments that required public service by a subservient people. Roman law required individuals from conquered nations to carry a load or pack up to one mile (technically a 1,000 paces or 4,854 feet).
 - i. Compulsion by a Gentile occupational force was particularly hated by Jews and complied with only grudgingly. (Matthew 27:32 is the lone New Testament example of a Jew being compelled into service.)
 - ii. However, our Lord’s teaching on forced service was jarring and astonishing. Rather than grudgingly complying, Jesus calls on His disciples to not only accept the imposition but also to volunteer for a double stint. To do this for anyone would be remarkable, but to do it for an enemy is unheard of. Yet, this is the degree in which our Savior wants us not resist or retaliate against evil people who seek to oppress us.
 - iii. Let me ask you this, what do you think the response of the Roman soldier would be when he witnessed an unexpected and powerful testimony of Christian discipleship? It was probably life changing.
- d. Lastly, He said *“Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you”* (v. 42). This example should be seen through the lens of *“Do not resist the one who is evil.”* Thus, while it would be tempting to ignore the pleas for help from an enemy, Jesus calls for His disciples to *“Love your enemies... and do good to those who hate you...”* (Matthew 5:43-48; cf. Luke 6:30-36). By doing this, we will be like our Father in Heaven.

3. JESUS THE MODEL OF NONRETALIATION

- a. But someone may ask, "Is it really practical to live like this, allowing people to walk all over you and all?" The simple answer is "Yes it is." The application of our Lord's teaching no doubt is difficult, but it is not outside the realm of the possible. Let's close by briefly looking at how Jesus lived out this principle during His arrest, trial, and crucifixion as a motivation to live His teaching in our lives today.
 - i. When Jesus was arrested, He did not resist; however, Peter did and was rebuked (ref. Matthew 26:47-57).
 - ii. During His illegal trial our Savior did not resist even when He was slapped and spit upon; literally He turned the other cheek (ref. Matthew 26:57-68; cf. Isaiah 50:6).
 - iii. Even when the enemy beat Him, crucified Him, and took his garment, He did not resist (ref. Matthew 27:1-2, 11-44).
 - iv. Finally, as the Lord hung on the cross, people passed by hurling insults at Him and yet He did not retaliate. Instead He prayed, "*Father forgive them, for they know not what they do*" (Luke 23:34).
- b. It was our Lord's actions on the cross that Peter pointed to when he said, "*When He was reviled, He did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but continued entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly*" (1 Peter 2:23). Later in the same epistle he said, "*Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing*" (3:8).
- c. Let's go back to our question, "Is it really practical to live like this?" The answer is unequivocally yes! Jesus demonstrated that it was, and Peter calls for Christians to imitate our Lord's actions saying, "*Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking*" (4:1). Only in this way can we imitate the One who preeminently exemplified each of these traits at a place called Calvary.

Too much of the world's ethic is to strike back, get even, and do unto others like they do to you. Many times the justification for retaliation is the ancient law of, "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." But Jesus says no to personal revenge; instead He says, "Go the extra mile." The Teacher's words challenge us to engage in the unnatural behavior of active forms of non-resistance and non-relation. Therefore, the responsibility of each disciple is to apply our Lord's words to the different personal and social circumstances in which they find themselves. May the Father give us the faith to replace retribution with nonresistance; resentment and hatred with "*Going the second mile;*" and indifference with uncalculating generosity toward our enemies.