

Resist Not Evil

Matthew 5: 38-41.

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The Lord here advances beyond all Jewish and indeed human thought, when He enjoins on His disciples patient grace on all kinds of inflicted wrong. To resist it is forbidden. He cites from the law the principle of talion, as it is styled, or retaliation, expressly to abandon it. It was particularly open to abuse; but even when applied with the strictest justice, and acting as a powerful check on human vindictiveness, how far was it from the mind of heaven which Christ was manifesting on earth, and laying down as the only conduct proper to the sons of His Father! Can we conceive a greater shock to Jewish feeling?

"Ye heard that it was said, Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth. But I say to you not to resist evil; but whoever striketh (or shall strike) thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And to him that would go to law with thee and take thy vest (or tunic), leave him thy coat (or mantle) also. And whoever shall impress thee for one mile, go with him two."

No doubt that on such a ground the world could not enter. To the natural man the rule of the heavens is impossible. Yet it is a favourite theme for such persons as believe neither in the Deity of the Lord nor in His atoning worth to descant on the Sermon of the Mount as the perfect ideal of Christian legislation. It is no more than an academic recitation. Nor is it that they have the most distant notion of obeying it themselves, nor do they expect others to exhibit such unworldly traits. If wrong were done them in person or property, as the Lord describes, they utterly object to its applying as a living authority. Even pious men help their unbelief by crying out against understanding His words as they read, and argue for spirit against letter.

Now it is true that here as everywhere mere letter fails. One might imitate the outward acts described and come short of what the Lord aims at throughout His entire discourse. The most rigid obedience of His sayings in order to life and the Father's love would in such a case prove a more fiery law than that of Sinai. For the Lord begins with spiritual qualities in His own, in vain sought in fallen man, and such as characterise a divine nature of which grace gives the believer to partake. Blessed indeed are such, as He pronounced them, and the more, not less, when persecuted on account of righteousness in a world of lawlessness; and if reviled and persecuted for Christ's sake, called to rejoice and exult, because their reward was great in the heavens. What can man do to hurt those who are happier the worse they are treated? The secret is that they are more than conquerors through Him that loved them, and abjure all merit of their own. But they have a new life (and it is the life of the Second man, not of the first) whose internal marks were displayed practically, as the Lord described in the opening verses of the Sermon (Matt. 5: 1-12), and their separate position before men follows (vers. 13-16). In all that thence is given us the Lord enlarges the law and the prophets, so far as to rise above them immensely in scope till, as here, we have grace in suffering from evil instead of punishing it as the law provided.

It was what God had sent His Son to manifest here below, and none fully follow. But suffering for His sake might be our portion as it often has been of our brethren. Thus all our meetness for God's presence depends on His death and resurrection, as our pardon on His blood. and we own our absolute indebtedness to His grace for both. It is our duty and joy to follow and imitate, as indeed He is our life;

and He is the standard in not resisting evil.

But cavillers who would pare down and fritter away His words are not ashamed to argue that He meant them not literally, because when struck on the face for His answer to the high priest, He calmly remonstrated, while bowing to the insult. Was this paying evil back in its own coin? On the contrary it was One who did no sin nor was guile found in His mouth, who when reviled, reviled not again, and when suffering threatened not. In fact He presented far more than the other cheek, for they spit in His face, and buffeted Him; and struck Him with the palms of their hands with the utmost contempt. No! the Lord yielded to wrong instead of resisting it; and such is the true calling of the Christian.

Here we may if need be follow Him in spirit and letter. As man is tenacious of his little goods, the Lord puts the case, not of offering personal violence only, but of depriving him of what attaches to man by a legal suit. What then does He call for? "To him that would go to law with thee, and take thy vest, leave him thy coat." How much better to lose one's clothes than consistency with Christ? The spirit of the injunction goes farther than the one cheek or the outer coat. What men seek is to evade all suffering and hold their human rights in defiance of His words, thus losing the reality of Christianity and retaining not even its semblance.

There was another claim in those days of which the Jews were prone to complain as an intolerable hardship. The imperial government authorised its officials, on their errands, in certain cases to require personal attendance, and with their beasts of burden too. How men are apt to be vexed with what after all is no great burden, and none so much as a people like the Jews under their heathen lords! The Lord would raise His disciples above all such self-will. "Whoever shall impress thee for one mile, go with him two!" With what simplicity and force He provides His own with a spirit to carry them in meek dignity above the squabbles of the world! How unworthy of Him would be the letter of refusing to go four or five miles, if such were the requisition, because the Lord had said, "Go with him two!" The real mind of the Lord is that he should willingly exceed what he was asked. It is grace in patience.

Can anything convince you, my reader, that you can neither be nor do what is essential to enter the kingdom of the heavens? There is but one way, Christ; and this way you can only get by renouncing yourself. So inseparable are faith and repentance. He saves by giving not redemption only, but a new and divine nature which hates self-will, and which loves and does God's will. Hence you obey according to the law of liberty, as contrasted with the Jew under the law of bondage.