

RETHINK: Getting Even ***Matthew 5: 38-48***

Do not resist one who is evil.

Jesus teaching in Matthew 5:38-48 brings us to perhaps the high point of the Sermon on the Mount. Christ calls us to show total love towards the one who is evil (39) and our enemies (44). "Nowhere in the Sermon is the challenge greater. Nowhere is the distinctiveness of the Christian counter-culture more obvious." (Stott)

The excerpt, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" comes straight out of the Mosaic Law. The law of Moses was a civil as well as a moral code and this law was an instruction to the judges of Israel (Deut. 19:16-21). "But the Scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day extended this principle of just retribution from the law courts (where it belongs) to the realm of personal relationships (where it does not belong). They tried to use it to justify personal revenge, although the law explicitly forbade this: 'you shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people (Lev. 19:18).'" (Stott)

Jesus is not prohibiting the administration of justice, but rather forbidding us to take the law into our own hands. In personal life, we must not retaliate – verbally, in actions, or in spirit. We must commit our cause to the righteous Judge, as Jesus Himself did (I Pet. 2:23) and avoid personal revenge. Jesus calls us to overcome evil with good. "Hate multiplies hate ... in a descending spiral of violence and is just as injurious to the person who hates as to his victim. Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend for it has creative and redemptive power." (Stott)

Love your enemies and seek their good.

Once again the Scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day made a blatant perversion of the law. In Lev. 19:18, Moses commanded, "Love your neighbor as yourself, I am the Lord." But the Scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day perverted the law by excluding "as yourself" and adding "hate your enemy." Jesus says it is our duty to love our neighbor, be he friend or foe.

"Throughout his exposition Jesus sets before us alternative models by which he contrasts secular culture and Christian counter-culture. Ingrained in non-Christian culture is the notion of retaliation, both the retaliation of evil and the retaliation of good. The first is obvious, it means revenge. But the second is sometimes overlooked, 'doing good to those who do good to you. The first says, 'You do me a bad turn, and I'll do you a bad turn,' and the second, 'You do me a good turn and I'll do you a good turn,' or 'You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours.'" Retaliation is the way of the world; revenge and recompense, paying back injuries and paying back favors. Then we are no man's debtor, we keep even with everybody. It is the device of the proud who cannot bear to be indebted to anyone. We administer ourselves, so that nobody gets the better of us in any way. But it will not be so in the kingdom of God! Sinners, Gentiles and tax collectors behave that way. It is the highest to which they can rise. What more are you doing than others?" (Stott)

Stott, John R.W.

"Christian Counter-Culture"

1978

Discussion Primers:

1. How literal should we take Jesus' commandments to "turn the other cheek," to "give others the shirt off our back," to "do good to and pray for our enemies?"
2. How do we get past the natural instinct to retaliate to actually actively and genuinely loving an enemy or an evil person." Where does that power come from? What does it accomplish?
3. Can you cite examples where Jesus actively modeled these commands? Can you cite an example where he seemingly did not "practice what He preached?"
4. What does loving and doing good to our enemies and the evil person do for us? For that person(s)? For our world? For Jesus' kingdom?
5. What does it mean to "be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (5:48)?" Doesn't that seem totally unachievable?
6. Is it possible to apply these same principles to conflict between nations instead of going to war to protect ourselves and/or establish just causes?

Parallel teaching from Romans 12

"Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse." (14) "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. ¶In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (17-21)