

6. Retaliation and Retribution

Contemporary society has ingrained retaliation and retribution in our culture. Consider the parent who says, "When you go up to that school, don't take anything from anybody." Or, the politician who advocates attacking another country because they just might attack us. Or, the number of people who carry weapons to protect themselves. In the beatitudes, Jesus calls for attitudes and values of the heart that curtail one's impulse to strike back. For example, one who is *poor in spirit* will not likely strike back. One who is *meek* will place the other person first. If the attack is because of one's religion, the Lord expressly commanded in Matt 5:11-12:

"11 Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

The Old Testament principle of an *eye for eye, and tooth for a tooth* gives way to the New Testament law of the spirit. [Footnotes for Matt 5:38: Ex 21:24; Lev 24:20; Deut 19:21.] This rule—an eye for an eye— continues in many religions and cultures today.

Do Not Resist an Evil Person

Matt 5:38-39

38 "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' 39 But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person"

Do not resist an evil person is the crux of the New Testament law restricting retaliation and retribution. In the civil world order approved by God, God himself establishes authorities to deal with evil people, according to Rom 13:1-4:

1 Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. 2 Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. 3 For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. 4 For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.

It is especially important that in the church, members refrain from retaliating and striking back. The meekness and kind spirit taught by Christ will keep us from sudden and bad responses. Paul also instructed on the proper attitude toward one another in Phil 2:2-5:

. . . make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. 4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.

It is important that Christians rely on God to avenge them their adversaries. Paul taught in 2 Thess 1:6-10:

6 God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you 7 and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. 8 He will punish those

who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power 10 on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed.

The Right Way Is Opposite to the Way One Might Think

Matt 5:39-42

If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. 40 And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. 41 If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. 42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

These are difficult sayings for many people to accept. Our first response very well may be to strike back. However, the sayings are unqualified and have certain meanings. Consider what the Lord did not mean. He did not mean that in some circumstances he will approve striking people. To the contrary, Peter told us not to repay evil with evil in 1 Peter 3:9, “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.”

The new rule of the gospel must apply to every facet of a Christian’s life. 1 Tim 3:3 charges elders to be gentle and not quarrelsome [no striker ASV]. Most violent acts of retaliation and retribution occur among family members and close associates. Husbands who strike out against their wives and wives who will not submit to their husbands become evil people within the family circle. Paul tells each—husband and wife—how to act toward one another in Eph 5:22-31:

22 Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her . . . 28 In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church— 30 for we are members of his body. 31 "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."

Eph 6:4 charges fathers to deal with their children without provocation: “4 Fathers, do not exasperate [provoke to wrath ASV] your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.”

The Christian is to give way quickly to the evil doer, turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, etc. Even if the Christian has rights under the law, it is often better not to pursue them, settling matters quickly. In Matt 5:25-26, Jesus taught, “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison.”

Conclusion

The phrases--*turning the other cheek* and *going the extra mile*—are permanent in the lexicon of our culture. Yet, more often than not, we ignore them. Husbands and wives fight back; employees have altercation at work; children fight at school. The end of violence is to break

up a home, to lose a job, or to be kicked out of school. Wars are often a result of retaliation and retribution on an international scale. The Gospel of Jesus Christ calls for a fundamental change in outlook. The *eye for an eye* philosophy pursued by so many is contradictory to *not resisting the evil person*. To be Christ-like is to adopt this spirit. Of Jesus, Peter wrote, 1 Peter 2:21-23:

21 To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

22 "He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth."

23 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.

In the face of evil people, let us entrust ourselves to God. Imagine a family, a neighborhood, a business, a country, a world where there is no striking back, no getting even, and no retaliation and retribution. Only in Christ can one find such a place. Heb 12:14-15 teaches: "14 Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord." The burden of peace is upon the believer and not on the unbeliever, as Paul expressed in Rom 12:18-20:

18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 19 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.

Study Questions from the Scriptures

1. Matt 5:11-12: How are we to respond when people insult us, persecute us, and say all kind of evil about us?
2. Matt 5:38-39: What law supersedes the law of *eye for eye, and tooth for tooth*?
3. Rom 13:1-4: What is the Christian's relationship to governing authorities? Who establishes governing authorities? What must we do to be free from those in authority? What is the purpose of governing authorities?
4. Phil 2:2-5: What is the Christian attitude toward one another? Whose attitude should we imitate? Whom should we consider better than we consider ourselves?
5. 2 Thess 1:6-10: What will happen to those who trouble Christians? When Jesus comes, whom will he bring with him? Whom will he punish? What will happen to his holy people?
6. Matt 5:39-42: If someone strikes us, how are we to respond? If someone wants to take what we have, what are we to do? If someone wants to borrow money, what are we to do?
7. 1 Peter 3:9: How are we to repay evil? If we do this, what will we inherit?
8. 1 Tim 3:3: What are the qualifications of elders in this passage?
9. Eph 5:22-31: What is the church to Christ? What *did* Christ do for the church? What does Christ *now do* for the church?
10. Eph 6:4: How are fathers to deal with their children?
11. Matt 5:25-26: How soon should you deal with your adversary? 12. Peter 2:21-23: How did Christ give us an example for dealing with adversaries?
13. Heb 12:14-15: What did Paul teach us about being at peace?
14. Rom 12:18-20: Whose is it to avenge? For what must we leave room?