

A Life of Love

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on August 12, 2018.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”
(Matthew 5:38–48)

There is within the heart of every person a sense of justice. The post-modern lie of our age is consistently betrayed when we are personally betrayed: I may justify sinning against you with a myriad of reasons, but if you sin against me, you will know my wrath!

What else explains our attraction to movies like Jason Bourne or Jack Reacher? In *Taken*, Bryan Mills (played by Liam Neeson) says to the man who has kidnapped his daughter, “I don’t know who you are. I don’t know what you want. If you’re looking for ransom, I can tell you I don’t have money. But what I do have are a very particular set of skills; skills I have acquired over a very long career. Skills that make me a nightmare for people like you. If you let my daughter go now, that’ll be the end of it. I will not look for you; I will not pursue you. But, if you don’t, I will look for you; I will find you, and I will kill you!” And, we in the audience are ready to see his “particular set of skills.” Why? Because we crave justice and want to see it carried out in the personal vengeance of a highly paid Irish actor! Justice shall be served.

Is our sense of justice wrong? Does Jesus teach us to relinquish this inner sense of right and wrong? Sadly, this portion of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount has often been misinterpreted as a replacement for justice and an argument for pacifism, pitting Jesus the meek against the strong arm of the law. Is this a fair interpretation?

The description of justice in Deuteronomy is clear: “Your eye shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot” (Deut. 19:21). But Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matt. 5:38-39). Is Jesus contradicting the very Law He claimed to fulfill? Is Old Testament justice replaced by New Testament pacifism? What does Jesus mean by a turned cheek?

A Turned Cheek

When we come to difficult passages of Scripture, we must remember that the Bible is not a jumbled assortment of incongruent books but the unified, inspired, inerrant Word of God. Let us remember that “All Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Tim. 3:16), and as a unified whole we should interpret Scripture with Scripture. What then is meant by “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”? We find this expression repeated several times in the Old Testament. First in Exodus 21, “But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe” (Ex. 21:24-25). Second in Leviticus 24, “If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him” (Lev. 24:19-20). The third use is in Deuteronomy 19:21, which I read earlier. The concept of this law is equity in public justice: Let the punishment fit the crime.

But did this mean individual lawless retribution throughout Israel? If you knock out my tooth, is it my personal responsibility to knock out yours? How is justice to be served? In all three cases in the Old Testament, justice is *never* served individually. You may have a particular set of skills, but they are not skills for personal retribution. In all three Old Testament passages, there is the equivalent of a judge and civil justice. There is a place for justice.

But is this only an Old Testament description? Did Jesus nullify the punishment of crime? Listen carefully to Paul’s New Testament description of justice in Romans 13: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience” (Rom. 13:1–5). The civil magistrate bears the sword of justice, an authority ordained by God, and this civil justice is good. “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord,” (Rom. 12:19) and He often carries out His vengeance through His ordained sword of civil justice. God ordains civil justice, not personal vengeance.

What then are we to make of Jesus’ instruction? First, based on the examples Jesus gives, his instruction is to the Christian individually, not to the civil state. Rather than seeking personal retribution, do not resist. Rather than returning the slap, turn the cheek. Rather than sue, give. Rather than refuse, go the extra mile. Whether it is deserved, give and lend without expectation. The genius of Jesus’ teaching is in His perfect use of hyperbole to convey the concept. Second, the context of Jesus’ instruction is inseparably tied to Him:

“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely *on my account*. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in

heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:11-12, emphasis added). When we are reviled for Christ, when we are persecuted for Christ’s sake, rejoice and be glad!

What does this look like? Have you been attacked for Christ? Do not reciprocate. Have you been slapped for Christ? Turn the other cheek. For Christ’s sake, give away your tunic, and go the extra mile. For Christ, give to those who beg or borrow. Why? Paul explains it this way, “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (Phil. 3:8–11). In Christ, “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.”

Jesus’ teaching does not contradict the Law, but in fulfilling it He reveals the greater depth of the Law: Love. Paul summarizes this connection this way: “For the commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom. 13:9–10). The Christian life is a life of love, and a turned cheek is emblematic of a loving heart.

A Loving Heart

Jesus summarizes the Law testifying, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind...And...You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37-39). Is it logical to deduce then that “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy? Apparently, this was the teaching of Jesus’ day? Pitting neighbor against enemy allows hatred of enemy.

Let us recall that the parable of the Good Samaritan was given in response to the question: “who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29), and “neighbor” was, to the surprise of the crowd, defined as the one who shows mercy (Luke 10:37). The legalistic heart seeks to define in order to sin, but the loving heart seeks to understand to love as God loves. If you live a life of love for Christ, you may be hated and garner unwanted enemies. Rather than hate and retaliate, a loving heart loves and prays. To love your enemies and to pray for those who persecute you is to testify of whose child you are, and we love because He first loved us.

As a child of God, consider the gracious love of God. Is it only upon you that the sun shines? Is it only upon your garden that the rain falls? Are not God’s earthly blessings enjoyed by just and unjust alike? Sometimes, like the Prodigal Son’s brother, I think we wish it were otherwise. Lightning bolts of God’s righteous justice would solve so many of our cultural problems, as long as they strike our enemies and not us. This would make

love so much easier wouldn't it? Loving those who love me is so much easier than loving those who do me wrong. Thankfully, we aren't God. Thankfully, we are neither our own personal avenger nor our own standard of love. Thank God we have a perfect standard.

A Perfect Standard

Our perfect standard is God: "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). While we may not want to love our enemies, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). How easily we forget that "While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (Rom. 5:10). The perfect standard of love is heard in this: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Such is the perfect standard of God's love that the justice of God was satisfied in His wrath poured out upon His only Son, our Lord.

We do not seek personal retaliation, because our perfect standard is the justice of God in the death of Christ. The perfect standard of justice is revealed in the perfect love of God in Christ. And, it is in Christ alone that we hear His loving demand upon us: "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2). Because the perfect standard of God's justice was satisfied in the perfect sacrifice of Christ, we are called and enabled to live according to His perfect standard. Put simply: The life of the redeemed in Christ is a redeemed life in Christ. And a life redeemed by the perfect standard of righteousness is a life called to live according to the perfect standard of righteousness.

Brothers and sisters, let us love God and others, for by this we know love, that Christ laid down His life for us (1 John 3:16). The Christian life is a life of love, because God is love.