

## **Retaliation**

Matthew 5:38-42

The Gospel reading today is a continuation of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In the first 5 verses, Matthew 5:38-42, Jesus instructs His disciples not to resist evil people, a teaching that has provoked much debate over the centuries.

Jesus says: *"You have heard that it was said: 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.'*" Many today regard "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" as a description of a legal system that is cruel and unjust. At the time of Jesus, the Pharisees and teachers of the law regarded these words as a formula for personal revenge. But both opinions are wrong. In the first place, when Moses said, *"life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise"* (Exodus 21:23-25), he was not giving the Israelites a formula for taking personal revenge. The Word of God clearly forbids any form of revenge. *"Do not say, 'I'll do to him as he has done to me; I'll pay that man back for what he did' "* (Proverbs 24:29). That matter belongs in God's hands. These were regulations for the courts to use. They were a way of stating that the punishment should always fit the crime and should not be excessive. It is obvious that the Lord never intended them to be applied literally, and there is no evidence that this was ever done.

What do we do when we are set upon by an evil person? The best response to an evil person is to accept mistreatment, rather than to retaliate. A slap in the face is an insult, an expression of contempt. The most effective response is simply to endure it. That in itself may put the offender to shame.

Jesus goes on to say, *"If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat as well!"* In other words, don't even contest the matter.

*"If anyone forces you to go two kilometres, go four kilometres with him!"* The matter of 'going the extra mile' is a reference, first of all, to the legal right of ancient Persian postal couriers to requisition animals or anything else they might need to reach their destination. The Romans, who had occupied the land of the Jews, gave their soldiers the right to compel any civilian to carry their pack for a mile. When that happens, Jesus said, voluntarily go 'two miles.' We think of Simon of Cyrene, who was compelled to carry Jesus' cross.

With these directives Jesus was not giving His disciples a list of legal requirements for them to obey literally and mechanically. That would have been no improvement over the traditions of the Pharisees. He was speaking rather of the attitude Christians should have toward those who wrong them or abuse them. He wants us to find ways of showing love in return for abuse. One way is to accept double abuse or to do double what is demanded. Verse 42 reads, *"Give to the person who asks you for something, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you!"* This does not tell us to give a double portion of anything someone asks for or wants to borrow, but it does clearly tell us to be ready to help people who are in need without necessarily expecting to receive anything in return.

In regard to all the concrete situations mentioned in these verses, there are other scriptural principles that we should also keep in mind. We are to testify against wickedness even when we permit it to be done to us. Martin Luther commented, "One must strictly distinguish between the hand and the mouth. The mouth must never concede wrong; but the hand must be held quiet and not avenge itself." Jesus demonstrated this during his trial and crucifixion.

The Bible also clearly states that anyone who is unwilling to work does not deserve to eat. We need not feel guilty about refusing to provide for someone who obviously is able to work and has the opportunity to earn his own living but prefers not to. As a matter of fact, we should feel guilty if we encourage someone to be lazy and idle, a parasite on society, using up resources that ought to provide for those who are truly in need through no fault of their own.

So here, and throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus does not give us simple answers to be applied mechanically when others abuse us or try to take advantage of us. Before you respond, He is telling us, *search your own heart*. Look for a way to respond that will show Christian love for others and glorify God. This response will not always be the same in situations that appear to be the same. It is also true that two Christians may conscientiously respond in different ways to the same situation. So we need to examine our own hearts and evaluate our own motives and never presume to judge someone else's heart.