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Sermon

Revenge and Recompense

Matthew 5:38-48

27/2/20

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Tit for Tat

When John Matar came outside on his birthday, he found two tons of manure piled eight feet high on his front lawn. The present, from his brother, was the latest in an outlandish gift-giving war that erupted between the two when John sent his brother one of those "insulting" birthday cards. He got 50 back. The next year John received a pet rock which weighed about 2 tons. He responded with 10 tons of pebbles and a note telling his brother that the pet rock had babies.¹

Eye for an eye:

That behaviour, maybe amusing between brothers, although I think the humour got lost at some stage there. But trading ever-increasing injuries leads to increasing harm.

It was this practice that the Old Testament rule "an eye for an eye" stopped. It was a law of restraint. The unrestrained tendency of revenge is to go to the extreme. It is this spiralling series of revenge attacks that the Old Testament law prevented. It commanded that the punishment for an action should not be disproportionate to the offence. No more than an eye, if an eye is lost. No more injury than the tooth which was knocked out.

Jesus comments on that Law with a different viewpoint. Firstly, he is not saying absorb endless punishment from bullying opponents. Let's look at the examples he gives.

The first is someone striking you on the right cheek. David Stern in the *Jewish New Testament Commentary* offers this insight. The Mishnah, a collection of Rabbinical teachings, says of the "eye for an eye" principle:

"If anyone wounds his fellow, he becomes liable to compensate the injured party for five different aspects of the injury: damage, pain, healing, loss of time from work, and insult...."

¹ *Campus Life*, Jan, 1980, p.22.

Note that the Jews were required to compensate those they insulted. When a first century Jew heard the expression, "Eye for an Eye," he would not have taken that literally but would have thought of "litigation and compensation."

In most cultures a slap in the face is considered a great insult. When Christ is talking about turning the other cheek, He is not addressing the issue of self-defense in general, nor national policy, but He is addressing a debate of the day, namely, did the "eye for eye" command apply to being insulted? Christ made it very clear that individual believers who are insulted for His Kingdom must bear it.

The second example relates to law suits. Back in verse 25, he said settle quickly with your adversary. Here again, he says it is better to suffer a minor loss than drag through the courts. He does not favour principled actions for small real issues.

When he was a lawyer, Abraham Lincoln was once approached by a man who passionately insisted on bringing a suit for \$2.50 against an impoverished debtor. Lincoln tried to discourage him, but the man was bent on revenge. When he saw that the man would not be but off, Lincoln agreed to take the case and asked for a legal fee of \$10, which the plaintiff paid. Lincoln then gave half the money to the defendant, who willingly confessed to the debt and paid the \$2.50! But even more amazing than Lincoln's ingenuous settlement was the fact that the irate plaintiff was satisfied with it.

The third instance was the right the Roman army had to demand that civilians carry their baggage for one mile. Of course, it was hated by the oppressed subjects. But Jesus offers a different response from the grudging compliance or possible violence men might offer.

Just give more. Yet even here, it is not unlimited. He does not say go as many miles as the soldier might wish you to walk. He instructs his followers to go two miles rather than one. This action changes everything.

Victor Frankl, an Austrian Jew, discovered when he was in concentration camp during the war, that giving more than demanded allowed him to be in control. Because he then gave freely, rather than being forced to act against his will, it changed his attitude to the persecution entirely. It allowed him to survive psychologically.

God loves all mankind

Jesus continues with our attitude to enemies. He shows us that God has mercy on those who resist and oppose him. He does not withhold sun and rain from the disobedient. Lord Bowen, a 19th century judge ventured to suggest a certain inequality persists. He wrote:

*The rain it raineth on the just
And also on the unjust fella;
But chiefly on the just, because
The unjust steals the just's umbrella.*

Jesus says show love to those we regard as enemies. Anyone can love their friends. That is not love but affection or self-interest. If we are to show the family likeness, then we must love those we don't agree with.

There have been various attempts to summarise the OT Law.

Micah came out with the famous verse: "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."²

² Micah 6:8

Hillel was a famous Jewish Rabbi who was active between 30BC and 10AD. He was known for his gentleness and moderation in his interpretation of the Law. One day an impatient Gentile asked Hillel to explain the entire Torah. Hillel's response was brilliant: "Whatever is hateful to you, do not do it to your fellow. This is the whole Torah and the rest is commentary; go and learn it."³ Hillel's summary is brilliant but it is a minimum standard.

Jesus flips this the other way around, "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."⁴ By flipping from the negative to the positive, he moves us from a minimum focus to a maximum focus. Not how little can I do but how much can I do?

When autumn leaves fall and are slippery: Hillel would say, "Rake your path so no one slips and falls." Jesus would say, "Rake your own path and then your neighbour's too."

When you are short of money: Hillel would say, "Don't steal." Jesus would say, "See if there is someone else worse off you can help."

When someone annoys you: Hillel would say, "Don't speak badly of the person." Jesus would say, "Find something positive to say about them."

Be perfect

The conclusion of this section is: Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Literally: You shall be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

This is about the process of sanctification – being made holy. The sense is being made perfect, whole, mature, complete, fit for purpose. Being perfect does not mean without sin. It is to be fit for purpose.

He says, 'As you develop in these things I have taught you, you will become like your heavenly Father.' What are we going to be perfect for? Jesus has told us already – we are designed to reflect the nature and character of God.

It is rather like climbing a mountain. If you look up the mountain, there is a long way to go. Yet if you look back, you realise that you have already ascended some distance. As we go on with Christ, we are changed to be more like him but there will always be more to come in this life.

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³ Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat 31a*

⁴ Matthew 7:12