

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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TURN TO HIM THE OTHER CHEEK

Matthew 5:38-42

Some time ago, I was working with someone who asked me about my religion. The question came rather suddenly. We were having a superficial conversation when he asked me, 'By the way, what's your religion?' He thought that I would be a Buddhist or something of that kind since I am an Asian. So I briefly told him that I am a Christian and what it means.

This man was a French Canadian with a Catholic background. He knew a little bit about the Bible. After he heard my explanation, he made the comment that he has long ceased to believe in the Bible. He said, 'There are many things in the Bible that I don't agree with. Take for example when Jesus said, 'If someone slaps you on the face, you show him the other cheek.' To me, it just doesn't make sense. How can you accept that kind of ethics?'

An embarrassing ethics?

That was his justification for not believing in the Bible. How would you answer this person? Is he right to say that some of Jesus' teaching doesn't make sense?

Today I would like us to focus our attention on this passage, found at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus said, *...whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also*. In our society that has a Christian culture, even the non-believer is very familiar with this passage. They have all heard about it.

What is it that the Lord Jesus is saying? How are we to understand this passage? Does Jesus actually teach that we are to present the other cheek when someone has just punched us? What kind of meaning is there in all this?

The biblical context

As I always say, the first thing that we have to do if we are to study correctly any passage of the Bible is to check the context. These words of the Lord Jesus are to be understood in the context in which they have been said. It is very dangerous to take a verse and to try to understand it without regard to the other things that Jesus says in connection with this verse. And the context of this verse is found in Matthew 5:38-42.

*Matthew 5:38. You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'
39 But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.*

40 *If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also.*

41 *And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two.*

42 *Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.*

When you read commentaries about this passage, you will notice that the most common thing that they say is that the Lord Jesus is teaching non-retaliation. The Christian is not to seek revenge when harm is done to him. Although this is certainly true, it seems to me that Jesus is saying more than that. If Jesus only wanted to say that we are not to retaliate, He could have said, 'If somebody strikes you on the cheek, don't hit him back.' That's non-retaliation in plain language. But that's not exactly what Jesus says. He says, *If somebody strikes you on your cheek, **turn the other to him also.*** That seems to be a lot more than non-retaliation. Don't you agree? There is a spiritual meaning in turning the other cheek and we shall see what that meaning is.

Slap the right cheek

I have to point out some technical points to help us to understand this passage more accurately. Notice what it says. 'If anybody hits you on the right cheek.' It is not just any side. The Lord Jesus is talking about the right cheek. Nothing is wasted in the Word of God. Let's say you have a person in front of you. The only way you can hit him or her on the right cheek is by turning your hand around and hit with a backhand stroke, assuming you are right-handed, which most people are. So in order to hit on the right cheek, you have to hit the person backhanded.

There is a significance in this. The backhand stroke was a very insulting stroke, a very offensive one. When you check the Jewish law, you will see that if you slap a person with the palm of your hand, you will be fined 200 zuzims. But if you slap a person with the back of your hand, you will be fined 400 zuzims. That means to say that the backhand slap was regarded as a double insult, an insult worthy of a double fine. So under the Jewish law, to slap a person is considered as a great insult because by doing so, you have humiliated that person. But by slapping him with the back of your hand, you have inflicted double damage upon him.

In our society, the situation where we see this happening the most often, when a person slaps the face of another person, is in the context of conjugal violence. And most of the times, I would say 9 times out of 10, it is the male who slaps a woman, it is the husband who hits his wife. When this happens to a Christian wife, is she commanded to stand there and provoke her husband by presenting the other cheek? Is this what Jesus is saying in Matthew 5:39?

You know, I've seen a lot of violence among disturbed couples. From a simple bruise on the wrist because the male was shaking the arm of the woman, to rape and murder. You don't know how angry I get every time I see that happening. And I don't think that Matthew 5:39 tells us that if you are the victim of a physical injury, you are to stand there and allow the offender to punch you even more. But our interpretation of a biblical passage cannot be based only on common sense. We need to discern the spirit of this passage. We need to penetrate into the mind of God.

A principle of justice

This whole section begins with the statement, *An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.* This is a universal principle of justice, mentioned in the Law of Moses in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. In any society, you must have justice. You take somebody's eye, you lose your own eye. You chop off somebody's hand, you get your own hand chopped off. You kill somebody, you lose your own life. It is the principle of exact retribution. Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

In the court of law, this principle of justice constitutes the basis of law. There is no question of forgiveness in the law. It is no use saying to the judge that you are sorry and that you are not going to do it again. You did something wrong? You are going to pay for the damage on the basis of exact retribution. Of course, this is not applied literally, not even in the OT courts. You are not going to lose a tooth because the person that you punched lost his tooth. The penalty is usually a fine that you have to pay. And the amount of that fine is in proportion to the gravity of the damage done by the offender so that the principle of justice is respected.

The purpose of law is for the control of sin. Man is sinful, the society is sinful, and therefore you must have law to control sin. Otherwise sin will run wild. Just think for a moment about what would happen if there were no justice in the world. Suppose that for the next seven days, no matter what you do, nobody can be charged. No law will be in force. I don't dare imagine what man can do when the restrictions of law are taken away. Human nature, when let loose, can be incredibly evil.

Man's way

This being so, that law is necessary in the society for the control of evil, what does it have to do with turning the other cheek? To understand this passage, we must understand a spiritual principle. It is the principle of the difference between human reasoning and divine reasoning. The difference between man's way of thinking and God's way of thinking. God said through Isaiah, *My thoughts are not your thoughts, My ways are not your ways*. And when you look at this passage, you see two entirely different attitudes.

The carnal way of thinking of the world is this. Human beings have rights. If a person does not have his rights respected, he will surely be trampled upon. And therefore, you must have law to protect the rights of the people. So far so good. Now here is the carnal twist. If anybody violates your right, if a person inflicts an injury upon you, then it will be required of him in the same way that it was inflicted on you. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, right? So if somebody does harm to me, I have the right to do the same thing to the person who offended me. That's worldly thinking.

God's way

But there is another kind of thinking, a spiritual kind of thinking. Paul says in Romans 12:2, ... *do not be conformed to this world* (to the thinking of this world), *but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...* To be a Christian is to be transformed by the renewing of our mind. And the Lord Jesus, in this passage of the Sermon on the Mount, tells us how our mind is to be transformed. By four examples, He tells us how the character of the spiritual person is to be.

Look at this passage again. If anybody slaps you, **give him** your other cheek. If anybody takes away your tunic, **give him** your cloak also. If a soldier forces you to carry his baggage one mile (which was permitted by the law at that time), **give him** a second mile. If a beggar comes to you and begs from you because of his need, **give him** what he needs.

Do you see what Jesus is teaching through these examples? The common theme in all these examples is the matter of giving. To your offender, you give your other cheek. To the one who wants to sue you, you give your cloak. To the soldier who wants you to carry his baggage, you give one extra mile. To the beggar who asks from you, you give what he needs. This is how our mind is to be transformed. The spiritual thinking is to give. You give even what is not required of you to give. And sometimes, you give beyond all reason.

So here we see the contrast between the carnal way of thinking and the spiritual way of thinking. The carnal man lives under the slavery of sin. And because the character of sin is always to take, the carnal person seeks to take. But the spiritual man seeks to give rather than to take because he

knows that it is more blessed to give than to receive. Look at the Ten Commandments. None of the Commandments forbid you to give something. But they do forbid you to take something because the character of sin is always to take. You shall not covet, you shall not steal, you shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery. That's all about taking. And when you take what you don't have the right to take, that's when it becomes sin.

Do not resist an evil person

Now, let's take this one step further. Remember again how Jesus begins this passage. *An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth*. That means to say that justice demands that a like requirement will be asked of the offender. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth. Then Jesus goes on to say, *But I say to you*. I say to you what? I say to you, *Do not resist an evil person*. Here the Lord Jesus is not negating the principle of justice. In fact, He makes the law even more demanding. You see, because of the carnal nature in man, people have perverted the use of this principle of justice. They were using this prescription of the OT in such a way as to justify personal revenge. You punch me once. I punch you once. You rob me. I rob you. People were using this principle of justice to seek evil for evil. And the Lord Jesus says, 'Don't do that. Don't resist an evil person. Rather, overcome evil with good.'

Look at these examples again. If somebody slaps me with a backhand stroke, don't I have the right to bring him to court so that he will be fined with 400 zuzims? Sure you have the right. But I say to you, **wave your right**. Give it away. Don't insist on it. If somebody wants to sue me and take what belongs to me, don't I have the right to fight back? Sure you have the right but I say to you, **give away your right**. Suffer the loss of your property. If somebody forces me to carry his materials even if the law allows it, don't I have the right to feel bitter and resentful towards that person? Sure you have the right, but I say to you, **give away your right**. Give him even more than what is permitted by the law. If somebody begs for money, don't I have the right to refuse? Sure you have the right to keep your money, but I say to you, **forget about your right**. The needs of others come before your convenience. So the spiritual man is someone who waves his right, even as Jesus waved His right to His heavenly glory by becoming a man who will suffer for the sins of mankind.

Forgive

You can understand that this principle can easily be misunderstood and misapplied if we don't know why we should wave our rights. It sounds so unnatural, so contrary to our common sense. In this day and age, it is much more reasonable to talk about having your rights being respected. So why should I wave my rights? Because in this attitude, we find the whole essence of forgiveness. That's what forgiveness is all about. **To wave your rights is to forgive the other person**. If somebody steps on my shoe, I have the right to demand that he polishes it. But the spiritual man does not stand on his right. He gives it away. 'That's okay, I forgive you.'

And he forgives because he has experienced genuinely God's forgiveness. If God stood on His right, we would be all finished. Do you realize that? If God is to stand on His right because we have insulted His divine nature, because we have lived a life that is so far away from His law, because we have not given Him the glory that is His due, if He stands on His right, none of us would be here today. But by God's grace and mercy, He did not stand on His right. He forgave us, and therefore, we also must forgive.

How dare we stand on our rights when our own sins, when our own debts have been forgiven? Remember. The character of sin is always to take. And the more you take spiritually, the more you go into debt. And forgiveness is the forgiving of these debts. The spiritual man waves his right. He doesn't stand on his right because he knows that his own debt has been forgiven by God.

Winning souls through the love of Christ

One final point before I close. The Christian does not stand on his right because his thinking has changed. His primary concern is for the other person. 'As God forgave me, so I, for Christ's sake, forgive you. I want you to see and receive the love of God. And ultimately, I would like you to be saved. That's why I wave my right.' The spiritual man is motivated by the love of Christ, concerned for the salvation of the other. He doesn't insist on his right because he is concerned not primarily for his own rights, but for the other person. He knows that love is the most powerful weapon by which you can win another person. And what can be a better expression of love than forgiveness!

It is in your life and conduct that people can see what kind of Christian you are. If you get slapped and out of anger you slap him back, any non-Christian can do that. But if you get slapped and in love you turn the other cheek, if in my turning the other cheek you can see the love of God, then slap me some more. If my giving you my coat can help you to be saved, then take my coat, please. If my walking a second mile can help you to be saved, then let me walk a third mile if necessary. That is the attitude of the spiritual man.

The spiritual man

So let us summarize. When the Lord Jesus says that we ought to turn the other cheek, does it actually mean to turn the other cheek to the offender? By now, you realize that we have to be careful not to press these words too literally. It doesn't mean that you have to put your life in danger, or that you have to be taken advantage of. Use your judgment. A few verses earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, *If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you.* Do we follow that literally? No! That's not the point. The point of that drastic statement is that we must take sin very seriously.

So what is the point of turning the other cheek? When we read it in its proper context, we discover that it is the attitude of the spiritual man. And we saw three things about this spiritual man.

Firstly, the spiritual man has seen the character of sin, i.e. to take rather than to give. And being renewed in his thinking, he reverses the process. He seeks to give rather than to take.

Secondly, the spiritual man does not stand on his right because he has come to understand forgiveness, that the very essence of forgiveness is the waving of rights. And he forgives because he knows that he has been forgiven by God.

And *thirdly*, he is willing to accept insult, criticism, threat, physical injury, with a forgiving heart so that in doing so, some might have the opportunity to be drawn to God. He overcomes evil with the weapon of love.

May God speak to our hearts through His Holy Word.