

Living by the Sermon on the Mount

Don Carson

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'Do not resist evil'? 'Give to anyone who asks'? Are Jesus' demands too idealistic to put into practice? DON CARSON doesn't think so.

The Jewish people had heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' This famous law is found in Exodus, 21, Leviticus 24, and Deuteronomy 19. Two things must be remembered about this law. First, however prescriptive it might have been, it was also restrictive; and therefore it was an excellent tool for eliminating blood feuds and inter-tribal warfare. Suppose someone cuts off my brother's hand, and I go and knock off the assailant's head. Immediately the initial violence has been escalated, and the assailant's family may feel honour-bound to butcher both me and my family. Where then will it end? But if, instead, the initial act of violence is met with reprisal in precisely the same kind and degree, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, that is the end of the matter. Second, the law was given to the Jewish people *qua* nation. The law was not designed to be discharged by individuals swept up in personal vendettas, but by the judiciary.

From justice to vengeance

By Jesus' day, however, both of these fundamentals were frequently overlooked. It became all too easy to see the law as prescriptive, and only marginally restrictive. The question then became, How far may my personal retaliation extend, without breaking the law? Worse, the law was thus being dragged into the personal arena, where it could scarcely foster even rough justice, but only bitterness, vengeance, malice, hatred.

Jesus responds with sweeping authority: 'But I tell you, do not resist an evil person' (5:39). How is this statement to be taken? Tolstoy's view that there should be no soldiers, policemen, or magistrates because they resist evil people became famous. But note carefully what Tolstoy is doing: he is extending Jesus' statement to mean that no one may resist an evil person who is attacking a third party. For example, twice in my life I have stumbled into a scene in which my physical presence prevented violence. Both occurred late at night in the slums of Toronto. In one, a fellow was attacking a girl; he ran off as I approached. In the other, a drunk was using a bottle to menace a couple as they cowered in a corner. I put myself between the drunk and the couple, whom I urged to leave with appropriate alacrity. Naturally, the drunk turned on me; but as it happened, he never did try to thrust his bottle in my face, and so I was spared the necessity of having to relieve him of it. Nevertheless, it can scarcely be denied that I was guilty of resisting an evil person. Does Jesus' injunction condemn me for my action?

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Not many would answer in the affirmative. However, many Christians would be prepared to argue, on the basis of what Jesus here says, that no Christian should ever resist evil directed at him, and therefore in principle no Christian should ever join a police force or an army. They acknowledge that God has given the power of the sword to the state (cf Rom 13:1-7), but conclude that no Christian should ever be found in any force or position of civil authority which would require him to resist evil people. These committed pacifists feel that any other alternative dilutes what Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount.

Making allowances

This problem is not an easy one, and what I write is not likely to resolve it. However, it is necessary to make due allowance for both the background in which Jesus was preaching, and the antithetical form of his utterances, so typical of him. All interpretations of the text do this at some point or another. For example, Jesus says in 5:42, 'Give to the one who asks you.' In Cambridge, England, where I first presented this material in lecture form, a large number of beggars prey on the student population, with constant and frequently belligerent demands for hand-outs. Some of these men are in dire need, and it is a shame there is still no adequate centre for them. But many are just using the students. They get to know the softhearted ones, and literally prey on them. Several times when I have been approached for money for food or for shelter, I have offered a meal, have offered my time to try to find lodging, and the like; but, when I would not simply give money, my offers were spurned and I was roundly cursed for my pains. The money in question was allegedly to buy food or to provide shelter; but in too many cases it was spent on drink.

Is it the Christian's responsibility to shell out to the professional beggar, or to pay for the drug that is ruining another man? By saying, 'Give to the one who asks you', does Jesus mean there are no circumstances where that injunction may not apply? I know a Cambridge research student whose tender conscience led him to an affirmative answer to that question, and who went bankrupt as a result, quite literally doing the without food himself while he supplied half a dozen men with the alcohol they would have been better off without. Eventually he was helped to see that his actions, though well motivated, were helping neither the men nor himself, and were honouring neither Jesus nor his teaching.

Thus, no matter how much we wish to follow Jesus seriously, we discover, sooner or later, that seriously following Jesus entails hard thinking about what he said and what he did not say. We may not come to perfect unanimity on all points; but we must agree that absolutizing any text, without due respect for the context and flow of the argument, as well as for other things Jesus says elsewhere, is bound to lead to distortion and misrepresentation of what Jesus means.

As I understand these verses, I do not think that Jesus has policemen and soldiers in view. Explicit New Testament teaching concerning such occupations has more to do with integrity, contentment with wages, and the like.

Instead Jesus is speaking in Matthew 5:38-42 of personal abuse and personal self-sacrifice, using the misunderstanding of Old Testament law as his starting point. The four examples he gives bear this out.

Jesus' examples

The first concerns a sharp backhand slap to the cheek, a gross insult. The follower of Jesus is to be prepared to take another one rather than retaliate. There are famous stories of the transformed characters of people like Billy Bray, the pugilist, or of Tom Skinner, leader of the Harlem Lords, when they were

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converted. Once tough, hostile and belligerent, they meekly accepted insults and blows (and thereby deeply impressed some of their assailants). This attitude is especially important, of course, when the violence and abuse have come about because of some stand for righteousness (cf. 5:10-12); but the text need not be restricted to that.

The second example concerns a lawsuit in which a man is likely to lose his 'tunic', a long garment which corresponds to a modern dress or suit of clothes. The follower of Jesus will throw in the outer coat as well, even though this latter garment was recognized by Jewish law to be an inalienable possession (Ex 22:26f). It is unlikely, of course, that a lawsuit would be fought over a suit of clothes. But at stake here is a principle: even those things which we regard as our rights by law we must be prepared to abandon. In another context, Paul enlarges on this principle when he insists that followers of Jesus will prefer to be wronged rather than to enter litigation with another follower of Jesus (1 Cor 6:7f).

The third example probably refers to the Roman practice of commandeering civilians. 'If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles' (5:41). An ordinary Roman soldier could legally commandeer a civilian to help him, for example, to carry his luggage for a prescribed distance. Jesus' followers are not to feel hard done by and irritable in such cases, as if personally insulted, but are to double the distance and accept the imposition cheerfully.

Jesus' last example demands giving and lending that is cheerful and willing. The issue is not the wisdom or foolishness of lending money to everyone who comes along (for which see Prov 11:15; 17:18; 22:26), just as Cambridge beggars are not the issue. The burden of the passage is this: Christ will not tolerate a mercenary, tight-fisted, penny-pinching attitude which is the financial counterpart to a legalistic understanding of 'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth'. 'Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you' (5:42). Don't be asking yourself all the time, 'What's in it for me? What can I get out of it?'

We have no rights

The legalistic mentality which dwells on retaliation and so-called fairness makes much of one's rights. What Jesus is saying in these verses, more than anything else, is that his followers have no rights. They do not have the right to retaliate and wreak their vengeance (5:39), they do not have the right to their possessions (5:40), nor to their time and money (5:41). Even their legal rights may sometimes be abandoned (5:40). Hence, it would completely miss the point to interpret 5:41, for example, to mean that the follower of Christ will be prepared to go two miles, but not one inch further! Personal self-sacrifice displaces personal retaliation; for this is the way the Saviour himself went, the way of the cross. And the way of the cross, not notions of 'right and wrong', is the Christian's principle of conduct.

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