

"TURNING THE OTHER CHEEK"

INTRODUCTION

And Jesus said: "DO NOT RESIST ONE WHO IS EVIL.
BUT IF ANY ONE STRIKES YOU ON THE RIGHT CHEEK,
TURN TO HIM THE OTHER ALSO"

Jesus said a great many disturbing things. As a matter of fact, he was a very disturbing person - a fact that we sometimes fail to see. This is one of the most disturbing things he said - this command to turn the other cheek. It disturbs us all, because we have all been hit, hit not only by life - by disease, misfortune, and unhappiness - but we have also been hit by people. If we have not been struck physically, we have been "hurt" which can be worse. All of us have the impulse to hit back, and most of us have! The reason these words disturb us so much is that, knowing this about ourselves, we begin to wonder and ask questions: was I wrong when I hit back? Was it wrong for me to have the impulse to strike back, even though I managed to restrain it? As a follower of Jesus, am I committed to turning the other cheek - always - under all circumstances?

I think all of you know what COMMON SENSE is apt to say in reply to such questions. Common sense says - give as good as you get. It says - if you don't look out for yourself, no one else will. Common sense says - the man who lets every one walk over him, really isn't much of a man. It says - to ask a person or to expect him not to stand up for himself, for his rights, to defend himself - why it's contrary to his own nature. It's impossible.

We see the logic of this without having to go further, and we know this is true as far as it goes. But I think we also know that there must be something more to it than this. Even though we may not understand the words of Jesus, or believe them, or practice them, we have enough confidence in his integrity and wisdom to know that his voice cannot be silenced entirely by the voice of common sense. Therefore, we recognize that there must be something in what he said about turning the other cheek that we have not yet fully grasped. So much then by way of introduction.

THE WORDS: FROM A DISTANCE

Suppose we first of all look at these words from a distance and try to see where they stand in the total life and teaching of Jesus before we bring them down to specific situations.

Jesus, in all of his teachings and in his ministry as a whole, was attempting to lead people beyond the morality of law, which is a morality based upon minimum requirements that a man must obey or be punished for not obeying. For instance, a person always has one eye out for a policeman who may catch him in some minor or major infringement of the rules. Jesus was trying to lead people beyond that sort of morality to something greater - in which the fear of disobeying is displaced by a love or a desire of fulfilling.

You're familiar with the law of his time and how a person was entitled to fair retaliation under that law. If you lost an eye, you were entitled to an eye in return. Or if you lost a tooth, you were entitled to a tooth in return. Under the law you were entitled to fair retaliation. This you are given by Hebrew Law, or Roman Law, or British Law, or our law - by the law of every civilized land.

However, when we move out of the REALM OF LAW into the REALM OF LOVE, we move into an entirely different climate. For instance, if a child, unwittingly perhaps, though deliberately sometimes, hurts a parent, the parent may reprimand him. He may discipline him, but the parent, if he's anything of a parent at all, would never dream of retaliating against the child, of trying to get even with him because the parent loves the child.

Or, in the relationship between good friends - one friend may wittingly or unwittingly hurt another and hurt him deeply. But if the friend who is hurt is anything of a real friend, with anything but self interest at the center of his life, he certainly would never want to retaliate against his friend. He would never try to get back at him. He may have those dark moments when he is tempted to, but at his best he would never do this, because he cares about him. Above everything else, he would certainly want to restore the relationship. All of which goes to show that as soon as you move from the realm of law to the realm of love, you are in a different climate - an environment in which retaliation withers up and dies.

WHAT JESUS WAS trying to do in his teachings was to lead people out of the courtroom of law into the throneroom of God. When that happens - a man becomes an entirely different creature. His motives are different. His outlook is different. His attitude toward people is different. He has an incentive he never had before.

We're beginning to move into deeper waters, and perhaps I should let a little light in on this so you can follow me carefully as we take the next step. An illustration at this point might be helpful. I remember a few years ago in the town where I grew up that there was a boy, younger than myself, who lived next door to us. When I was 14, he must have been 10 or 11. His father insisted that he learn how to play baseball. The father had been quite an athlete in highschool and college, and he use to enjoy showing the boys in the neighborhood how he could still kick a football over his house. The father wanted his son, in the worst way, to learn how to throw a ball like a boy, and to be able to catch a baseball. The boy wasn't very good at it. As a matter of fact, he didn't like baseball. He hated it. The father would take him out in the driveway between the two houses and spend an hour each day with the boy. The son would rebel. He would refuse. And when he did, the entire neighborhood would hear it. The father was just about to give up in despair and acknowledge that the son would never be much of a baseball player when suddenly it happened. One day he took his son and some of the other boys in the neighborhood to watch a major league baseball team. It was an exhibition game between the Yankees and the Amsterdam Rug-makers (a farm then of the Yankees). This was 1945. He was taken into the presence of Joe DiMaggio and Phil Rizzuto. He saw Di Maggio make graceful catches in center field, and saw Rizzuto make unbelievable throws from short-stop. The boy suddenly saw it all - caught the spirit of it - saw what the game could be. In something of a single flash he had a revelation of what the game could be, and he went back to his baseball lessons with an enthusiasm and ardour, and he turned out to be quite a baseball player. But that was the turning point. He had moved from obedience to the least that was required and expected of him - into a loyalty and a desire to do the most he could possibly do.

*Casually -
soft*

Jesus had a way of taking people into the presence of God - the God who is the Father of all mankind, the Creator of everything that is. The God into whose presence Jesus took men is a God who loves you and respects you, a God who makes the sun to shine on the evil and the good, who makes the rain to fall on the just and on the unjust. A God of indiscriminate vitality and energy. He took men into the presence of a God, a Father who sees all men as his children. A God who is always giving and forgiving - bearing and forbearing - creating and willing to pour something of himself into his creatures, making allowance for our failure to realize our highest potential. The God of Jesus was not indifferent to evil. He never took it lightly, but there is no indication that he ever held a grudge against the man who made a mistake.

Once a person sees this, he becomes like the young boy who was taken into the presence of Di Maggio and who went back to his lessons with a new ardour, new enthusiasm and a different perspective. He sees something that enthralls him. He sees something mighty in power and grace - an outgoingness, a givingness, a grandness - that makes his little tit-for-tat smallness and his desire for retaliation shrink into a corner for shame. He begins to act with something of the largeness of the spirit of Jesus - with something like the same extravagant grace that he sees in God.

Jesus, of course, mentions four situations in which the change the made manifest - a man slaps you in the face - a man goes to court to sue you for your shirt (you let him have your coat if that will do any good) - a Roman soldier orders you to carry his pack a mile - (you carry it two miles if it will help him) - a man wants to borrow something from you to tide him over (you say all-right, let him have it). Do you see now in a general way what Jesus was doing and is attempting to do. He has led you (if you've been willing to follow) out of the NARROW WAYS of obedience into the BROADER WAYS of allegiance. He has turned you away from your rights under the law, to your opportunities under God.

HIS WORDS: CLOSE UP Suppose we try in the moments that are left to bring these words down to specific situations in our day to day existence. Here, mind you, we're on our own. Jesus give us no specific answers.

Do these words mean that evil should never be resisted in any way, shape, or form? I cannot believe that. Why Jesus himself resisted evil every step of the way. He resisted the legalism of the Pharisees, the nationalism of the Zealots, he resisted temptation in his own life. If there is corruption in the government, or unfairness in your neighborhood, or injustice in society, I cannot believe that Jesus would have us stand by and do nothing. He would have us do something to set things right.

Do these words mean that people caught in the act of evil should be let off free - to go merrily on their way. For instance, if on the way home from church today you should see an innocent pedestrian held up, beaten, with the intention of robbing him, did Jesus mean for you to let the molester go on with his deed. Of course not. I cannot believe this, nor can you!

Do these words mean that violence is wrong - always wrong? This is more difficult to answer. I think the whole life and teachings of Jesus imply that violence is always wrong, always contrary to the will of God, but I think that he would recognize too that in this ambiguous world, it is sometimes unavoidable. Perhaps some of you can take a more absolute position than that, but I find this more and more difficult to do, though I respect and honor enormously those who can. I believe that Jesus in everything that he said and did implies that violence is always contrary to the will of God, in the world in which live, however, - full of conflict, half truths, and situations in which perfection is impossible, violence is something unavoidable. For example, if to restrain a man from beating a child to death, some measure of violence is necessary, I cannot believe that Jesus would condemn it. But how far and to what extent you allow this is not the question before us now.

What then do these words mean. Here we come to heart of it. To me, they are a warning against a spirit of revenge. Even more than a warning, they are a divine prohibition against it. This spirit of revenge - you know what it is. It's that spirit of wanting to get back at the other person, to get even with another person - not for the sake of principle, but for your own sake - to satisfy your own pride, to gratify those greedy impulses of hostility that lie just beneath the surface of your refinement. We all have them. This spirit of revenge ultimately poisons everything it touches - including you in whom it breeds jealousy, hatred, cruelty. Human relationships are too precious to allow these things to destroy them. It's been said that revenge is sweet. Is it? And for how long? Its taste is bitter. It poisons. And it kills the possibility of your ever becoming a son of God. This is what it does, and the man or woman who lets his spirit be the spirit of revenge is in danger of becoming lost.

CLOSING ILLUSTRATION

In 1958, a young man of 26 years of age came from Korea to study at the University of Pennsylvania. He came here because his parents were Christians, and because they thought of this land as the land of the free, the land where men were able to follow their best desires and intentions. They proudly sent their son here to complete his education. He went out one night in May to mail a letter home. He was beset upon by a gang of eleven Juvenile delinquents and killed with blackjacks and pop-bottles. At the funeral in Philadelphia it was reported that the mayor was in tears, and that the crowds of people who came were covered with shame.

Soon after the funeral a letter came from his parents, and this is what they wrote. They asked for the most lenient treatment possible within the laws of our society for the 11 boys accused of this crime. They offered to set up a fund for their religious, educational, vocational and social guidance whenever they were set free and then they continued with these words:

"We hope that you can spare a piece of land in your country and bury our boy there, for your land is part of the homeland of Christians and people of democratic society. Thus we will remember your people and your people our people and both you and we will more vitally sense an obligation for better guidance

of people whose souls are unsaved and whose human nature is paralyzed. We hope in this way to make his tomb a monument which will call attention of people to this cause. We wish to turn sorrow into Christian purpose in the hope that we can do something to minimize such criminal actions which are to be found not only in your country, but also in Korea, and we are sure - everywhere on earth.

There it is - as plain as you will ever see it. They had long left the courtroom of the law and entered into the throneroom of God. The spirit of revenge and retaliation had no place in their lives. They had joined the ranks of those who by their extragagant caring and loving have become redeemers themselves. These words of Jesus which sound so impossible to us had become ~~xxx~~ second nature to them. "If a man strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.....that ye may become the sons of your Father in heaven"

LET US PRAY: Open our hearts, Our Father, to a love that is too great to take offense.....to an understanding, too broad and too deep to seek revenge upon people who hurt and hamr us. And lead us out of the narrow ways of obedience to the minimum that life asks of us to an allegiance to the highest and the best and the greatest we know, an allegiange to Him in whom men have seen Thee. In the spirit of Jesus we pray. Amen