



The Power of Love

Matthew 5:38-48

The journalist, novelist and theologian GK Chesterton is famously quoted as saying: 'The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.'¹ It could be said that those words most readily apply to this week's reading from the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus asks from us what might be considered impossible by many, namely that we show a love to our enemies which reflects the love of God.

These verses offer another example of the pattern which has recurred throughout Matthew 5, as Jesus provides instructions to his disciples which move beyond commandments found in the Old Testament. As Dick France notes, however, 'Here Jesus' teaching moves even further away from the spirit of the OT law quoted than in any of the previous examples.'² The phrase, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth,' occurs three times in the Old Testament (Exod 21:24; Lev 24:20 and Deut 19:21). In each case the words are found in the context of legal instructions and their purpose appears to be to ensure that any retribution is limited and proportional to an offence which has been committed. Commentators believe that by the time Jesus was preaching it was no longer common for physical violence to be practised as a means of retribution, but that appropriate financial compensation was usually stipulated instead.

The instructions Jesus provides to his disciples in this regard can still surprise those of us who are familiar with them. It is not just that Jesus commands against taking retaliation. He goes further and encourages his followers to go to considerable lengths in demonstrating generosity to those who have offended them, even those who have committed an act of humiliating and wounding violence such as a slap on the cheek.

It is important to note the reasons Jesus offers for this new kind of response. We are not encouraged to act generously or to resist revenge simply because it is a constructive or attractive way of behaving. Instead, our actions are to be rooted in a new and deeper understanding of who God is and the way in which he extends his love and blessing to all. The very phrase 'love your enemies' seems, to most of us, to be a contradiction in terms. If we regard as people as our opponents and adversaries, it makes no sense that we respond to them in a posture of love and mercy. But Jesus reminds his followers that this is what God is like. It is in his nature to give his blessing to all, irrespective of whether or not they acknowledge him.

As Tom Wright comments:

¹ Source: <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/defender-of-the-faith-11-quotes-from-christian-wordsmith-gk-chesterton/109967.htm>

² RT France, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew*, 2007, 217

'Jesus offers a *new sort of justice*, a creative, healing, restorative justice. The old justice found in the Bible was designed to prevent revenge running away with itself. Better an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth than an escalating feud with each side going one worse than the other. But Jesus goes one better still. Better to have no vengeance at all, but rather a creative way forward, reflecting the astonishingly patient love of God himself, who wants Israel to shine his light into the world so that all people will see that he is the one true God, and that his deepest nature is overflowing love. No other god encourages people to behave in a way like this!'³

For discussion

1. Commenting on these verses, John Stott writes, 'Jesus *does* expect of his followers the very things which others think cannot reasonably be expected of anybody. How do you react to this?'⁴
2. For Jews living in the time when Jesus taught, the enemies were the oppressive Roman forces of occupation. 'Who is it for you? Who has power over you, and who uses it unjustly? And what might it mean for you to practise resistant love?'⁵
3. Can you think of any situations you have personally experienced when you have seen someone demonstrate the kind of radical, generous, non-violent response which is advocated by Jesus in Matthew 5:38-42? What impact did their behaviour have?
4. How does your understanding of Jesus teaching that God loves all people change your attitudes towards those who seem to be determined to resist his purposes?
5. 'Who are the victims of oppression in your world? Who are those facing, even now, the challenge to turn the other cheek? Might it be that you have strength to offer such people – that the difficult decision they make to choose resistant love could be made easier by your solidarity, your letters, your prayers?'⁶

³ Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone: Part 1*, 2002, 51

⁴ Question taken from John Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today: The Sermon on the Mount*, 1988, 230

⁵ Question taken from Gerard Kelly, *Humanifesto*, 2001, 38

⁶ Question taken from Gerard Kelly, *Humanifesto*, 2001, 38