

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, Seventh Sunday After Epiphany,  
February 19, 2017

**An Impossible Task**  
Dr. Kenneth Humphreys  
February 19, 2017

Mathew 5:36-48

Our scripture reading today is a continuation of the Sermon on the Mount which I have talked about the past two Sundays. Last week I referred to four things which Jesus said beginning with *"You have heard that it was said"* referring to things in the Law of the Torah and then telling you to do more than the Law required.

Today, Jesus uses the same phrase but instead tells us to act in a contrary manner to *"eye for an eye, and tooth for a tooth"* and *"love your neighbor and hate your enemy."* Jesus says no, don't do that. Do exactly the opposite. Is this an impossible task? Can we ignore bad things that people do to us? Can we not hate our enemy? It's an impossible task, or is it?

*"An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth"* is a principle known as "lex talonis" or "the law of the talon." It means that repayment for an injury may amount to no more than the extent of the injury.

Today in our court system we have something known as "punitive damages", awards which go above and beyond the amount of damages which may have been suffered to theoretically punish the offending party. The "lex talonis" did not permit this. Compensation could only be for the actual harm done --- nothing more. Compensation was always to be proportional to the harm done.

So OK, perhaps *"an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth"* is OK. Yes? **No!**

Jesus continues by saying *"But I tell you."* He goes on to say not to resist the person who is rendering harm to you. To the contrary, turn the other cheek, give them your shirt and cloak, and walk further than they tell you to walk. Be non-violent. Be like Gandhi or Martin Luther King. Is that an impossible task? What would that accomplish? How would the aggressor react? Would not he or she do something even worse?

Perhaps they would but in the long view, showing love, even to your enemies, is what God wants you to do.

Let's look back at what Jesus said, *"If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also."*

A strike on the cheek was an insult by a master, for example, to a servant. Generally it would be a backhanded slap with the right hand, a particularly insulting action. The left hand would not be used because in that culture the left hand was used only for cleansing the body after defecating. The right hand was used for everything else. Knowing that, a backhanded slap against the turned cheek would be almost impossible because the nose would get in the way. Practice it and you will see what I mean.

I hasten to point out that this reference is not to a fist fight but instead is to one person disciplining another.

Jesus, by telling the person to turn the other cheek is really saying to refuse to accept that kind of discipline any longer. If they backhand you, turn the other cheek..

Walter Wink said, *“By turning the cheek, then, the ‘inferior’ is saying: ‘I’m a human being, just like you. I refuse to be humiliated any longer, I am your equal, I am a child of God. I won’t take it anymore.’”*

*“If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, handover your coat as well.”* In the Torah giving up a cloak is a pledge to pay a debt. The cloak is collateral for the debt because the poor often had no other possessions. However the law required that the cloak be returned at night as the person would need it for warmth. The taking of the cloak was symbolic only.

If someone is suing you for the cloak itself, they are rich and you are poor. The difference is to shame the person who is suing you. Give them both your shirt and your coat as well.

The intention of the law is clearly not to be able to sue a poor person for his or her cloak. It would be a moral outrage to do so. It would be inexcusable and by giving up their garments, the person doing the suing is shamed.

*“If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles”* is a reference to Roman law wherein a Roman soldier could stop anyone and require them to carry the soldier’s pack for a distance not to exceed one mile. If you were a Jew at that time and place you could not resist such a demand. You might be toiling to scratch out a bare living but any soldier could take you away from that and force you to drop whatever you were doing just to carry the soldier’s pack. What Jesus is telling the Jews is to carry the pack even further than required. It was analogous to turning the other cheek or giving the person suing you your clothes. In all three examples, you are bringing shame to the

oppressor. You are saying, "OK, treat me like a slave."

One article that I read (*Pacifism, Matthew 5 and "Turning the Other Cheek"*, by Glenn, Oct. 29, 2012, [rightreason.org](http://rightreason.org)) said that the assumption of all three situations "... is that the oppressor will not do what you are allowing him to do because he has no right to do it," and, in the case of the Roman soldier, "... *he may get into trouble for doing it.*"

*"What all three of these scenarios have in common is that they are instances of a person abusing power over the powerless, and the powerless literally has no way out of the situation. The use of force would either land them in legal trouble or get them killed ... the appropriate response is to lower oneself in such a way as to vividly demonstrate the abuse that is taking place, shaming the one who is perpetrating it."*

That said, it is critical to understand that these scenarios do not relate to someone who is in physical danger or who is experiencing violence. Jesus is not suggesting that a victim of physical abuse should acquiesce and allow the abuse to continue to occur.

The instruction to turn the other cheek is not condemnation of the use of force to defend yourself or someone else. One who does so is not disloyal or disobedient to Jesus.

In our scripture reading, Jesus says to love your enemies and to pray for them so that "... *you may be children of your Father in heaven.*" Showing love only for those who love you is not what being a Christian means. Demonstrate love through non-violence as Martin Luther King did in so many places as he was being oppressed, as Gandhi did, and as Rosa Parks did.

Shame those who oppress you by demonstrating your love for everyone.

The Torah's law was intended to ensure that punishment was just and not malicious. *"But there was a larger principle ... when it came to personal revenge: Justice must be done, but it must be left in the hands of God or the authorities ordained by God.*

*"Instead of returning injury and insult, may we live by Christ-honoring and Spirit-empowered alternatives. Live at peace with everyone, submit to a spiritual mediator, and leave it in the hands of authorities, most of all in God's hands."* (*Our Daily Bread*, May 17, 2011).

*"Be perfect, therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect."* (NIV)

Is that an impossible task? Yes. But strive to do so and Christ will smile on you.

Let us pray, *“Lord, when we are troubled by the insult of another, help us to let go of any desire for revenge. May we seek justice but also realize that it will happen in good time. Teach us to overcome evil with good.”* (ibid)

**Amen.**

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011