

The Practice of Self-Denial

In this series of articles we're looking at the topic of retaliation from Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:38-42. I've asked the question, "Is retaliation ever an appropriate response when we believe we've been wronged by another person?" Last time, from verse 39, we saw that Jesus is calling on us to accept the loss of dignity, if necessary, rather than retaliate or seek revenge. There's no better example of this than our Lord Jesus himself. Listen to the words of the prophet Isaiah as he predicted the One who would come and suffer for his people. "I gave my back to those who strike and my cheeks to those who pull out my beard. I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting." (Isaiah 50:6) And how can we forget that after Jesus was hung on a Roman cross his response was one of concern and compassion for those who had crucified him. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34) Jesus is teaching that we may need to give up our dignity for the sake of the gospel. Let's look further in this passage at verse 40.

"And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well." The "tunic" was an inner garment worn directly against the skin and the "cloak" was the outer, more expensive, garment. At this time in the first century, most people did not have closets full of clothing as we do today. Each piece of clothing that was owned, particularly by poor people, was needed very much. In the Old Testament a cloak was sometimes taken as a pledge for a debt that was owed. But, if the cloak was taken as a pledge, it was required to be returned before the sun went down (Exodus 22:26). The cloak was often used to sleep in for protection against the cold nights. With this background in mind, let's consider what Jesus is teaching. If you find yourself in a situation where someone is suing you and they take the less expensive thing (the tunic), our attitude is to be such that we would even voluntarily give them something more expensive in order to show that we do not harbor bitterness or resentment. Again, the picture that we're seeing is a life of practicing self-denial.

Now stay with me here. I'm not suggesting that Jesus is teaching that we should always be a doormat to anyone who would try to harm us. I'm not recommending that this text teaches that, in any and every situation, we must give up our rights to civil protection under the law. Jesus is merely giving us examples that point to the fact that we must be willing to hold our dignity and even our legal rights with open hands. There may be times that, for the sake of the gospel, we'll need to give up our personal rights rather than put an obstacle in the way of our pointing someone to the beauty of Jesus Christ with our lives. And there may be times that this type of attitude will require us to give more than is, rightfully, required of us to give.

Let me give an illustration that may help us. In the book of Genesis we're introduced to Abram and his nephew Lot. Abram was a godly man and there came a time in his relationship with his nephew that there needed to be a parting of ways because they both had so much livestock that there was an obvious need for more grazing and water for the animals. So Abram, rather than causing strife, asked Lot to choose what portion of the land that he wanted

for his own and he would take what was left (Gen. 13:8-12). We can pass over these truths far too quickly. This is the true story of a godly man who would rather give up all that was good for his own family, flocks and herds in order that there would be no strife with his nephew Lot. Abram, as the patriarch of the family, had every right to require Lot to take the lands that were less desirable, but he chose to honor God by considering Lot more important than himself.

It seems to me that many of the relational problems that we face could easily be solved by remembering The Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." (Matthew 7:12 KJV) When we're willing to do this, God is honored, the gospel of reconciliation is beautifully displayed and we're always blessed as we seek, by grace, to follow God's word and his ways.

Rev. Dr. Steve Jones is the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church PCA in Paxton, Illinois.