

Giving to Gain

The Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew teaches us many important truths. The portion of the sermon that we've been examining pertains to the topic of retaliation taken from a phrase in the Old Testament, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Some have taught that this phrase gives any individual who believes himself or herself to have been harmed by another person the freedom to seek personal revenge. And yet, as we've seen, Jesus is teaching that there may be times that we'll need to give up our rights and even our dignity for the sake of the gospel. Our text is Matthew 5:38-42. Let's pick up Jesus' teaching in verse 41.

"And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles." This verse pertains to an ancient custom that allowed armies of ruling nations to place the citizens into service to help a soldier, if needed, particularly to help transport items from one place to another. This may have been the hardest of Jesus' examples in this passage for a first century Jewish person to swallow. Most of the Jews despised the Romans for their harsh rule as well as their occupation of lands given to them by God. The requirement for a Jewish man to carry a Roman soldier's pack would have been a great offense. And yet, Jesus is declaring that, rather than be angered, if the soldier, "forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles." In other words, anger and desired revenge for what may be thought of, by some, as a serious insult and loss of personal dignity is never allowed for a kingdom citizen. Don't think so highly of yourself as to believe that your pride or your rights are the most important thing.

Interestingly, we can see an example of this practice in Matthew 27. Just prior to Jesus' crucifixion and because of Jesus' weakened physical condition, the Roman soldiers required Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus' cross. Jesus is teaching that there may be times when we may be asked to relieve the burden of someone that we consider an enemy or even someone we don't even know at all. We're called to have an attitude of compassion toward them in order that the gospel might be shown forth in all its beauty and glory. Let's look now at verse 42.

"Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you." This final example pertains to the reality that we may be called to give what rightly belongs to us for the benefit of another. Christians will acknowledge that all that is truly good in our lives is given to us by God and we must be generous with what God has provided. When someone asks us to give them something or even to borrow something from us our attitude should never be to immediately turn away from them. Does this mean that we're simply to give away everything we have if someone asks for it? Christian author, Timothy Keller in his helpful book entitled, "Ministries of Mercy" can give us some biblical counsel here.

"God's mercy comes to us without conditions, but does not proceed without our cooperation. So, too, our aid must begin freely, regardless of the recipient's merits. But our mercy must increasingly demand change or it is not real love." There may be a number of reasons why a person is perpetually needy that we can't initially discern. As we get to know

them, we'll better be able to tell if this person is contributing to their own poverty. This can happen in a number of ways including not wanting to work or refusing to be a good steward of the resources that they have. However, it may be that they're looking for but have been unable to find a job or it may be that they have some type of diagnosed disability that prohibits them from taking gainful employment. The limit of our generosity can only, ultimately, be limited by the standard of love that the scripture requires. As Dr. Keller has written, "Let mercy limit mercy." If someone in need refuses to change sinful behaviors, our help will have to be taken away although we should continue to pray for them.

The point that we want to see from Jesus' teaching is this: when we biblically give of what is ours to help others we gain much more than we ever lose. I pray that this passage of scripture has reminded us of our Christian responsibility toward self-denial in principle and in practice.

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