

The Principle of Self-Denial

In my last article we looked briefly at events from the life of Joseph (Genesis 37, 39-50) in order to gain some biblical understanding of why we should never pursue personal retaliation when we believe we've been wronged. To say this is not to say that sin has no consequences, but rather, we want to address the wrongs done to us in a biblical manner. Let's continue our look at this teaching from Jesus on retaliation from Matthew 5:38.

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'" In this verse, Jesus is repeating Old Testament teaching from Moses (Ex. 21:22-25; Lev. 24:19-20; Deut. 19:21). These verses teach the principle of what is known in Latin as "lex talionis," which simply means that, "a punishment inflicted should correspond in degree and kind to the offense of the wrongdoer", i.e., let the punishment fit the crime. The reason behind this law is at least two fold. First, punishment is meant to be a deterrent from further crime (Deut. 19:20).

Secondly, this law was given to prevent excessive punishment. Sinners, apart from God's grace, will always seek excessive punishment for wrong done to us or someone we love. We get an example of this in Genesis 4 from the life of Lamech who said: "I have killed a man for wounding me....If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-seven fold." In our sinful condition we can often have no regard for others, but only for ourselves. The Mosaic Law guarded against the type of depravity that Lamech exhibited. The punishment for a particular crime could not be excessive.

It's also important to note that the Mosaic Law which regulated "lex talionis" was given to the appropriate authorities to handle. Witnesses were brought forward and a determination was made as to whether the party was guilty and if so, the type of punishment to be handed out (Deut. 19:15-21). It was not a law that allowed personal retribution or revenge. Sadly, in Jesus' day, the Jewish leaders taught that the Mosaic Law gave individuals a right to seek private revenge or retribution. They had overlooked a number of Old Testament scriptures including Leviticus 19:18, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD."

Beginning in Matthew 5:39 Jesus says, "But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil." How are we to understand Jesus' words here? First of all, an important principle of biblical interpretation requires us to bring the whole teaching of scripture to bear on verses that may seem less clear. If we were to take this verse by itself, while neglecting other passages, we might believe that we're never to resist any evil for any reason. Some have actually understood these verses this way. This is the belief of pacifists who reject any means of violence to settle disputes. The Russian author, Leo Tolstoy, based his novel, "War and Peace," on principles that he held were taught in this passage of scripture. He believed that there should be no police and no military and that any resistance at all should only be passive resistance. Mahatma Gandhi was influenced by Tolstoy's pacifist beliefs.

But, there are many places in scripture where we're told to resist certain evils. Jesus himself, resisted the evil of those who were profaning the Temple (Matthew 21:12). He also resisted the scribes and Pharisees who taught untruth. Along with Jesus' own resistance to evil, he calls on his people to be "salt and light" in our world. We're called to biblically address the darkness and decay we encounter in our society. Furthermore, the phrase, "Do not resist the one who is evil," cannot be speaking of Satan. We're clearly commanded to "resist the Devil." (James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:9) We're also told to stand up against the evil which comes into the church. We do this primarily through praying for, teaching, encouraging and warning an unrepentant brother or sister who's harming themselves and others. If necessary, and if the church is functioning properly, patterns of unrepentance will ultimately be addressed by church discipline through the office of the church leadership (Matthew 18:15-20).

In summary, Jesus is teaching us that, when we're treated wrongly by others, rather than seeking to retaliate, we're to have an attitude of self-denial. The apostle Paul writes, "...in humility count others more significant than yourselves." And, "See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone." (1 Thessalonians 5:15)

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