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Conducted by  
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**"How literally ought we to take the words recorded in Matthew 5:38-42?"**

"THESE words of our Lord to his disciples are: "Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for eye, and a tooth for a tooth: but I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also, And if any man will sue thee at the law and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away!"

I am sure that as young disciples of the Lord these verses puzzled us, and we wondered, and perhaps still do, just how literally they were to be interpreted. Each generation in turn is confronted with our Lord's words, and must come to a conclusion as to what exactly He meant by them. It is one thing to quote what Jesus said, it is sometimes quite another thing to say precisely what He meant. It is not that Jesus was vague: He was just extremely profound. By the time some commentators are finished with what Jesus said, one is left wondering if He said anything at all! It is therefore possible for us to water down and dilute the strength of what Jesus said; and it is equally possible to read too much into what He said.

#### **The Old Law Yields To The New**

In the chapter before us (Matt. 5) Jesus, in fairly rapid succession, presented to His disciples the then current understanding of parts of the law of Moses, and then immediately supplanted it with His own teaching and instructions. He was preparing His disciples for the time when Moses' law would be completely abrogated on the cross, and His law, of liberty replace it.

In v.38 He refers them to the Mosaic law of retribution for personal damages and injury, i.e. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." This law is contained in Ex. 21:22-25; Deut.19:17-21; Lev. 24:18-20. In these places it was given to regulate the decisions of the judges. They were to take eye for eye, and tooth for tooth, and even to inflict burning for burning. It is said that the Jews generally did not confine themselves to this judicial system of legal retributions, but carried it into their private conduct and *personally* took revenge on those who had caused them injury. Be this as it may. Jesus says that all this is to change and, at least as far as His disciples are concerned, an attitude of non-retaliation and forbearance is to be cultivated. Rather than seek eye for eye, burning for burning, hand for hand and foot for foot we are to "Resist not evil".

#### **Resisting Evil**

This requires qualification, of course, because in another sense we have to resist evil with all the power that we possess. We are to resist the forces of evil constantly.

When Jesus says, "Resist not evil", He means, of course, "Resist not the *evil treatment* which may befall us at the hands of others". He then proceeds to cite three examples which are to serve by way of illustration:

- (1) "Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek turn to him the other also". Physically, this is fairly well self-explanatory.

- (2) "If any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat let him have thy cloak also."

The Jews wore mainly two garments, an inner one called the "coat" (tunic or shirt) and an outer one called the "cloak". The outer one was the more important, especially at night. Under the Mosaic law it was forbidden to keep a poor man's garment from him at night, even if it had been taken in pledge (Ex. 22:26,27).

- (3) "Whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain."

The allusion here is apparently to the practice of the impressing of men and women into temporary service by the authorities. Post offices were unknown, and government and royal communiques were sent by official messengers. Such had the power to impress any person to assist the passage of these messages, and could also seize horse, ship or boat. The practice is said to have originated with Cyrus, king of Persia, and copied by the occupational armies of the Romans. The exercise of this power by the Romans was exceedingly distasteful to the Jews.

#### How Literally?

(1) In connection with turning the other cheek I suppose we could say that it is eminently unlikely that we shall ever be struck on the cheek. The sermon on the mount was more of an enunciation of general principles rather than a set of specific instructions to be followed in unlikely situations. The spirit of the Lord's words here is that we should ever adopt a policy of non-retaliation. Instead of turning on those who injure us and becoming party to personal feuds, we should take the injury with meek dignity. We should not meet violence with violence. In the unlikely event of our having our cheek slapped it is equally unlikely that we would literally invite our assailant to slap the other cheek. We would merely walk away without offering any retaliation. In John 18:22 we read that Jesus was literally smitten on the cheek. It is not recorded that Jesus invited His assailant to smite His other cheek also. He accepted the assault and mildly remarked "If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well why do ye smite me?" In Acts 23:3 the apostle Paul came close to being struck on the face, and gave a stern rebuke to the so-called high priest.

Obviously it is always possible that we may be physically assaulted and be required *literally* to implement our Lord's words; but in the main the application of them would be in a *figurative* sense. We can be assaulted in many ways; very often by words rather than by blows. We should turn the other cheek to slander and misrepresentation. I feel quite sure that the insults and verbal vilification which Jesus received were much harder to bear than the blow He received on the face. I feel sure, too, that any petty differences between brethren because of remarks made of a personal nature, would vanish at once if we could all learn to turn the other cheek.

Having said these things perhaps I should add that it is my personal view (no doubt not shared by all) that there are times when a *controlled amount* of physical violence is necessary — for instance when we need physically to chastise our children (or a teacher in school requires to wield the strap). If one is standing at a bus stop with his wife, or mother, and she is accosted by a drunk or bag snatcher is one expected to stand motionless and observe the incident or should he do something about it? If one sees a child being attacked by some sex criminal does one go to the child's aid or does he stand back at a safe distance? What would Jesus expect us to do? When Jesus said that we should turn the other cheek I do not think that He wanted us to be the doormat of all and sundry, and that we should let people walk all over us. Christ cleared the temple in no uncertain manner. Turning the other cheek does not mean that if a man steals my wallet I should give him my watch also. "Turning the other cheek" has, in my view, to do with *revenge*. We should not seek

revenge for evil done to us. If someone tries to rob me I will try to prevent him from doing so. If I *have been* robbed, however, or mistreated in some other way, I should *not seek revenge* by robbing the robber.

"Turning the other cheek" then *can* have a literal application but mostly would have a figurative use in situations other than those involving physical assault. We should patiently accept physical and mental injury from those around us, without endeavouring to retaliate by inflicting similar injury upon them. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay saith the Lord". (Rom. 12:19)

#### "Going To Law"

(2) Similarly, we can be sure that seldom would anyone be likely to sue us at law for our coats (mine is rather threadbare at the cuffs!) We therefore conclude that the mention of the coat (and the cloak) is but an illustration of the principle that we should try to exhibit great reluctance to dispute at law over material things. If sued at law for one unit, rather than contend at law, give our adversary that unit — plus another. In short we should be quick to reconcile ourselves with the adversary and shun contention. The only thing we should be contentious about is the faith — we should "contend earnestly for the faith" (Jude 3). The situation of suing at law should be unknown amongst the disciples of Christ. Paul makes this abundantly clear in 1st Cor. 6:1-9 where (v.7) he says "Now therefore there is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another. Why do ye not rather take wrong?... suffer yourselves to be defrauded?"

It is not unknown these days for brethren to go to law with brethren, but it is very wrong. Paul's words are surely a perfect commentary on Christ's words that if sued for our coat we should give our cloak also. It applies *literally*, and also figuratively, to situations outside the law courts.

(3) It is again very unlikely these days that anyone would want to compel us to go a mile. The principle, however, still obtains, *i.e.* that we should cheerfully acquiesce to the demands upon us of those secular powers (where those demands do not conflict with the commands of Christ) no matter how irksome these may be. This is the *literal* application. The principle has a wider application, however, and means that when a request is made of us, from whatever source, we should be quick and ready to provide twice the amount requested.

#### Guiding Principles

These are the ways, then, in which Jesus says we are to "resist not evil" or the evil demands and circumstances which may come upon us. They have, obviously, a literal application as suggested by the questioner, but they have also a much wider application, and are principles which can be applied every day to even the most trivial incidents.

I close with the words of Paul (Rom. 12:14-21) which to my mind sum up the matter very beautifully: "Bless them which persecute you: bless and curse not. Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep. Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things but condescend to men of low state. Be not wise in your own conceits. Recompense no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieh in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine: I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him: if he thirst give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good."

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