

## The Cloak and the Second Mile

Eric C. Coher

Matthew 5:38-42

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*You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. Matthew 5:38-42*

### THE CENTRAL THEME

As believers, we must be daily dying to ourselves.

*And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. Luke 9:23*

Though this is not intended to be an exhaustive list, Jesus puts his finger on several specific ways in which we can test and see if indeed we are growing in a death to self (Pride, Prized Possessions, Time, and Finances). We also have to remember that this text isn't meant to tell us what to do or give us the answer to every situation or circumstance. Jesus is teaching by way of principles in this passage.

### PRINCIPLE #1 – RESPONDING TO INSULT

*Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. Matthew 5:39*

What does this mean for me? It means that as a believer I am not called to retaliate or seek to avenge myself for injury or wrong that is done to me. Contrary to popular thought, this text is not describing the Christians response to a physical attack. The idea that Jesus has in mind here is that of another person, without any provocation, striking us on the cheek. This text is describing a traditional insult in which a person would slap another on the face. This was often times a form of persecution as a result of ones faith. Notice also that Jesus says, "If anyone slaps you on the right cheek." According to Rabbinic law, to hit someone with the back of your hand was double the insult. It communicated that the person doing the slapping considered you to be inconsequential – a nothing.

This was an insult for which, according to the law of Lex Talionis, a Jew could seek legal damages. But Jesus says, "Instead of taking your opponent to the cleaners, can you not lovingly absorb the insult?" You will show yourself to be my disciple by the way that you bear hatred and insults, overcome evil with good, and forgive injustices.

We know that the immediate desire of the flesh is to want to strike back and to punish. The principle here is don't repay evil for evil. Don't retaliate. Don't strike back. Don't seek your own vengeance. Don't be a self-appointed doer of justice. Let God deal with the injustice. Instead of focusing on the injury, focus on how you might be able to serve the one who treated you poorly. We see this in the words that Jesus uttered from the Cross. He had been beaten, mocked, spit at, and treated with the indecency of a common criminal, but as he hung watching His clothes be divided and bet on, He said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" Luke 23:34.

Hudson Taylor is a great example for us here.

*One evening he was standing on a riverbank in China and summoned a boat to take him across the river. Just as the boat was drawing near, a wealthy Chinese [man] came along who did not recognize Taylor as a foreigner because he was wearing the native dress. When the boat arrived, the Chinese [man] struck and thrust Taylor aside with such force that he fell into the mud. Taylor, however, said nothing; but the boat commander refused to take the Chinese [man], saying, "No, that foreigner called me, and the boat is his, and he must go first." The Chinese traveler was amazed and astounded when he realized he had blundered. Taylor did not complain but invited the man into the boat with him and began to tell him what it was that made him behave in such a manner. As a foreigner he could have resented such treatment, but he did not because of the grace of God in him. A conversation followed which Hudson Taylor had every reason to believe made a deep impression upon that man and upon his soul.<sup>1</sup>*

How easily offended are you? How concerned are you with your own honor? Can you swallow your pride? To the degree that you have your rights gripped with an iron fist, you will respond to mistreatment in an embittered way instead of a gracious way. This doesn't mean that I never involve the law, but it does mean that I don't become a self-appointed doer of justice.

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<sup>1</sup> Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 248-249.

## **PRINCIPLE #2 – RESPONING TO A RIP-OFF**

*And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. Matthew 5:40*

The second issue that Jesus puts his finger on is that of our legal rights. In the culture of the day a man could be sued in court for his inner garment, but not for his cloak or outer garment. The outer garment was seen as indispensable or a necessity of life in Palestine. It is most likely that Jesus is referring to a believer being falsely sued because of his faith. It was an early form of persecution. Jesus says, “When you are sued and your opponent is awarded your tunic (shirt), give him your cloak too even though he cannot legally take it.” What is the point of such an action? Why would a person do such a thing? Because doing so presenting an incredible opportunity to be salt and light for Christ. Remember what Paul said in Romans 12:

*Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Romans 12:17–21*

Examples:

Matthew 18:15-17 - How we are to deal with an erring person.

John 18:22-23 - Jesus is unlawfully struck on the face.

Acts 16:37 - Paul and Silas are unlawfully thrown into a Roman prison.

## **PRINCIPLE #3 – RESPONDING TO FORCED LABOR**

*And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Matthew 5:41*

This practice predates its Roman use here in Jesus’ day. The Persians initiated a sort of pony-express in which the mail carrier would simply “borrow” horses to complete his route. When one horse became too tired he would get off of it and “borrow” another until his job was complete. This same idea was carried over into Roman culture in which a Roman official or soldier had every right to commandeer a man to transport his baggage.

Being forced to carry the burden or load of Roman official or soldier was a common occurrence in Jesus’ day. Almost every Jewish person had at one time been subject to this heavy-handed treatment and as you would expect, most hated even the mention of it. This was often times used as a means of

persecution for those who followed Christ. As a matter of fact, some think that this is the reason Simon of Cyrene was forced to carry Jesus' cross up Golgotha's hill (Matthew 27:32). Jesus is encouraging His followers to a willing cheerfulness when they are forced to labor under this kind of persecution.

There are two ways to do any task, begrudgingly or cheerfully. As followers of Christ we are called to respond to mistreatment in a way that makes much of Jesus and shines bright light on the gospel message. The professing believer who responds bitterly when pressed into a difficult circumstance doesn't make anyone wish to know his God. The one who acts selflessly and responds cheerfully on the other hand opens the opportunity to share the gospel of grace in a powerful way.

While it was the right of the government to make a man carry an official's load for a mile, it was not his right to make him carry it further. Jesus is saying, "Though you may not be legally obligated to carry [an official's] belongings more than a mile – do it!" Jones comments, "The result will be that when you arrive this soldier will say, 'Who is the person?' What is it about him that makes him act like this? He is [acting] cheerfully and going beyond his duty." This man will be seen as one who doesn't look out for his own interest, one who isn't bent out of shape when his perceived rights are violated. He isn't bitter and resentful, but cheerful!

#### **PRINCIPLE #4 – RESPONDING TO BORROWING**

*Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.  
Matthew 5:42*

Though we are not called to give to every need or every open hand, we are called us to a deep generosity that often exposes our propensity towards selfishness. Jesus is putting his finger on the self-nerve that show themselves when we are struck on the face, asked to give up our coat, being compelled to carry the load of another, or give of our goods and wealth to help someone in need. Jesus is touching the nerve that says, "What I have I hold, and what is mine is mine. I cannot listen to the requests of others because ultimately I may suffer."

Again, this text will be misapplied if it's interpreted as being a wooden and mechanical rule. Jesus is not insisting that we give to every freeloader who comes your way. As believers we have an obligation to exercise discernment in the stewardship of the resources that God has given us entrusted to us, but at the same time we are called to be givers. John, in his epistle writes, "If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth" 1 John 3:17–18.

As to our responsibility for discernment Alexander Maclaren says:

*If turning the other cheek would make the assaulter more angry, or if yielding the cloak would make the legal robber more greedy, or going the second mile would but make the press gang more severe and exacting, resistance becomes a form of love and duty for the sake of the wrongdoer.*

We need to keep in mind that Jesus' words here are not merely a set of cold, ridged, mechanical rules. Rather they are principles to be applied for the believer when he is wronged as a result of following Christ. When Jesus takes up regency in the heart of a man or woman he changes our old retaliatory, vengeful propensity and replaces it with a desire to love and serve others – even our enemies. Aren't we thankful that Jesus didn't treat us according to what was fair? I am reminded of David's words in Psalm 103:

*He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust. Psalm 103:10–14*

Jesus' words here are not just nice sayings that would make for a better life or a better world. They are impossible words. Apart from the grace of God no man or no woman could ever live out these imperatives. May Jesus work His grace in each of us so that we do not hold onto our rights with a clinched fist, so that we do not insist on others treating us fairly, and so that we are willing to be vulnerable. For in doing so, we will shine as a bright light in a dark and decaying world. Remember Jesus words in Matthew 5:16, "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."