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Hear Ye Him #125
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The Sermon: RESIST NOT EVIL

Scripture: Matthew 5:38-45 (a)

Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an 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 sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke 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. Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven.

Recompense to no man evil for evil.

The "Lex Talionis" or law of retaliation was a part of most ancient legal codes, such as the Code of Hammurabi, the Mosaic law, and the Roman Law. The law of retaliation, as simply stated by Jesus, was "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." The law allowed legal retaliation in the exact amount and kind of the crime itself.

In striking contrast to this ancient law we find Jesus laying down a new principle: "Resist not evil." We should note in passing that this is a principle of personal relationships, not a prohibition against resisting temptation or evil in the abstract. Modern translations make this point clearer by rendering the phrase, "Resist not one who is evil." Retaliation, which was legally permitted under the Mosaic law, was forbidden under this new law. Under the law of Christ the mere fact that wrong has been done to a man does not give him license to do another wrong in retaliation, for even in legal retaliation there are almost inevitably a certain vindictiveness, and a desire for revenge and for self-justification, which are immoral and unchristian.

Under the new law of love the injured party was not to be simply passive, but was required to seize the initiative from the aggressor by turning the other cheek, by giving his cloak to the one who took his coat, by voluntarily going the second mile with the one who conscripted him as a burden bearer. Such an action is designed to throw the aggressor off balance. An evil man cannot take by force that which is already freely yielded, or compel the doing of that which is already being freely done. And whereas one threat breeds another threat, and an act of retaliation breeds a desire for more retaliation, on the other hand, a willing and loving submission to an evil man opens the way for remorse, repentance, reconciliation, and reclamation of the offender.

Jesus taught that we should always keep open the channels of reconciliation and forgiveness by refusing to retaliate for an injury, or by returning good for evil. He taught that we must forgive all men; that God's forgiveness depends on the forgiveness we give to others. "If ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

Under the new law of Christ then, we should be willing to suffer insult, injury, loss of personal property, or even death, rather than to retaliate in anger or hatred against those who offend us. Jesus set the example when he suffered death on the cross with no malice in his heart for those who had arrested him, convicted him, and executed him; and thereby he made the cross the symbol of all human redemption, as well as the symbol of the Christian way of life. But no man took Jesus' life from him. No man could take it from him, because he gave it first.

We should always be willing to forgive. We should always make the first move to reconcile our enemy by making him our friend. But does "Resist not evil" mean that we must forgive indefinitely in the face of wilful, malicious, persistent, calculated offense? In the 17th chapter of Luke, Jesus lays down another principle which must be considered in contrast to this: "If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him." There is some indication here that there may come a time when it is compatible with Christian ethics to withhold forgiveness, and to restrain the persistent and unrepentant offender to prevent him from doing further harm to us or to those whose safety depends on us.

When Jesus said "resist not evil," he did not mean that society or organized government has not both the right and the obligation of restraining the criminal with force, for on another occasion he commanded, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's," and both Peter and Paul counselled the early Christians to be subject to the powers of government. Forbidding the use of such force by responsible government or refusing to participate in it would soon result in total anarchy. Offenders who will not or cannot obey the laws of government may be restrained and removed from society as offenders against moral law are removed from the church -- not from any motives of revenge or retaliation, but from motives that are reformatory, protective, and exemplary.

By the same reasoning, the same government which is charged with the responsibility of protecting its citizens under constitutional law, has the right to call upon its citizens for help in protecting and maintaining that government. Love of neighbor demands that we assist in protecting his rights, even when we may be willing to relinquish some rights of our own by reason of our Christian principles. I have often wondered how Jesus would have told the story of the Good Samaritan if the Samaritan had come along while the thieves were beating and robbing their victim. Would Jesus have had him pass by on the other side, as some of the free nations of earth have passed by with averted eyes when innocent smaller nations were victims of aggressive and rapacious attack?

One great difficulty, of course, is that under government, we have constitutional and statutory law, judges and courts to administer it, and police and other law enforcement agencies to back it up. Disputes between persons may thus be settled more or less dispassionately, and without any danger of the individual taking the law into his own hands from motives of revenge. In case of a dispute between nations, however, there is some international law, but no court, and no police force which can compel an aggressor nation to obey. The injured nation can only go to war, and war inevitably brings its hatred, its cruelty, its vindictiveness, its lying and deceit and hypocrisy, its death and poverty, and destruction for both nations.

Modern total war is a hellish and devilish thing. We cannot always be sure that war, even when waged by our own government, is totally just. We know that it must be waged by completely immoral means, injuring the innocent as well as the guilty, destroying sometimes more than it saves. When war comes (and it will continue to come until Christ returns over all nations) sometimes the Christian must choose whether to defend righteousness, justice, truth, freedom, mercy, and love, or to submit willingly to a force that would destroy all that he holds dear and good. It is not an easy choice.

God has gone to war in the past, and he will again in the future. When Lucifer tried to set up his way of coercion and moral and spiritual slavery in heaven, an army under Michael cast him out -- by force. The 19th chapter of Revelation describes another great battle in the end of time, when the Lamb and his armies shall fight against the forces of evil, defeat them, and make of their flesh a great feast for the birds of the air. God goes to the limit in trying to reconcile evil men to himself, but in the end he is going to restrain evil by force. If it becomes necessary for us to fight in defense of what we believe to be right, let us search our souls to be sure that we have gone as far as God would go in trying to love our enemy, before we lift up the sword against him.