

What Did Jesus Mean? - Part 4.

Non-resistance to Evil.

For the second time in this series of talks on problem passages in the Gospels I am turning to the Sermon on the Mount and to what is possibly as well known as anything which Jesus said, concerning non-resistance to evil. In Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 5, the verses 38 to 40, we read: "You have heard that it has been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That you resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue you at the law, and take away your coat, let him have your cloak also." For many people Christianity has come to hinge on this. An impractical ideal though they may regard it, and fall far short of it in their own lives as they may do, this is, they believe, what being a Christian is all about. A Christian should turn the other cheek, and, so it is thought, offer no resistance when an evil is done to him.

But it would be strange teaching, to say the least, if this is what is meant. We can point to instances where the Lord Himself resisted evil, such as when He took a whip and drove the money-changers out of the Temple. And, as must be our concern here, it needs little imagination to picture what the world would be like if evil wasn't resisted. Clearly, there are occasions when it has to be, and harm would result if it were not. Why then did Jesus say something which, at least as it stands, suggests that Christians should meekly and without offering resistance, allow themselves to be abused and stood over?

It would be well, I feel, if we paused to consider the context in which these words were originally spoken, first of all. With a better idea of the thinking of the people to whom Jesus was speaking we can more easily see the reason for the stress and emphasis His words have.

It seems incredible to us that until the time of the Lord's Coming on earth, life among people was governed by the old idea that you did to others whatever they did to you - blow for blow, injury for injury, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. "You have heard that it has been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." For that was the law of the Old Testament (see Exodus 21:24). This was the code people lived by. And Jesus sought to break the hold it had on them. He came to set new standards of behaviour before people and to teach them other ways of going about things.

And so He went on to do this. "But I say unto you, That you resist not evil." Here was a totally new concept, an astonishing departure from the normal way of going about things. Whereas retaliation was automatic in those days whenever an offence had occurred or an injury had been done, now this was not to be so. The Lord asked of His listeners and followers that they rise above their natural feelings for revenge. Indeed, He said, if you are struck on your right jaw offer the left one also. If a man is suing you for your coat, let him have your cloak as well.

We may, in fact, well question whether those who heard Jesus took His words literally. It was the principle He was teaching which mattered. And that principle is as relevant and as important to us, as it was to them. It is wrong to want to revenge evil; to want to hit back; to want to hurt others in the way they have hurt us. And we shall see, this doesn't mean non-resistance to evil, but it does forbid resistance which is of our own making; resistance that springs from ourselves and which is born of anger or hurt pride. "You have heard that it has been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That you resist not evil".

When we have been injured or offended; when something has been done which exasperates us; when an evil has been committed; we are not to respond with a spirit of vengeance. This is what is forbidden. It doesn't mean we are to do nothing about it. As we saw earlier, life would be impossible if evil were not resisted. But we shall not resist in anger and from a desire to hurt or humiliate. Society must punish an evil-doer. Aggression and bullying must be resisted. But in doing so we must restrain our anger, the desire to hurt, and the inclination to retaliate. More than anything else it was this hankering after revenge which the Lord was getting at. "I say unto you" He said, "that you resist not evil" and went on to show, by example, how and in what way control will be called for. "Whosoever shall smite you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue you at the law, and take away your coat, let him have your cloak also."

It would, however, be wrong to suppose that what Jesus said here was merely illustration and nothing more. This is the purpose these words served when they were first spoken, this is true, but concealed within them, as the Lord intended it should be, is an internal meaning which enables us to see them in an altogether new light and as involving teaching which is indisputably relevant to us all.

Always where it is mentioned in the Word the right hand, either of a person or a thing, as compared to the left hand, corresponds to what is of love; to good; to man's will and affections. The left hand, or the left side, corresponds to the understanding; to wisdom, and to truth. It is, we read, from the existence of Love and Wisdom in the Lord, the Creator, that in each and all things of the (human) body there are a right and a left; and the right relates to good and the left to truth. (*Divine Love and Wisdom*, 409).

In most places, and on the surface, it seems inconsequential and of no significance which (right or left) is mentioned. But this is far from so. It is of the utmost significance, for example, that the Lord commanded the disciples, as they fished, "to cast the net on the right side of the ship" (John 21:6), by which is meant to act from good; to reach out with love and affection; for this is what brings results. And so also here, with these words of the Lord in Matthew, the inner meaning of which, and in a few words, I would now like to summarise.

If something which we love - for this is what is meant by the right cheek- is attacked or criticised, rather than act angrily or defensively, we are to turn the other cheek. We are, in other words, to explain and show why it is that we love that thing. If, for example, the Commandments, being important to us, are attacked by those around us, rather than an angry defense of them we should instead try to quietly show why they are important to us and why it is we try to uphold and live by them. And it is the same with all our principles and ideals. Attacked and assulted as they may be; as, indeed, in all probability they will be; our response should be in terms of a reasonable explanation of their importance to us. And we are to leave it at that.

But we have the Lord's words about garments as well, and here again it is in the light of the inner meaning they contain that their relevance and importance is brought home to us. "And if any man" the Lord said, "will sue you at the law, and take away your coat, let him have your cloak also." The coat as such was the closer fitting inner garment worn by people of those times and the cloak a looser fitting outer garment.

Garments, we are told, correspond to the truth and ideas we have which, as it were, clothe our minds. Aspirations are 'clothed' in our minds with ideals; inclinations 'clothe' themselves with ideas. Feelings 'clothe' themselves with thoughts. The will as a whole only ever presents itself before us 'clothed' with our understanding. It is, therefore, this clothing of the mind; the things we know and understand; to which the Lord is referring here.

It happens from time to time that people, not agreeing with us, will want to argue that our understanding of things is wrong. We find ourselves in a discussion about things and, not agreeing with us, someone will try to change our thinking; to persuade us otherwise; to take away our coat; to remove that understanding we have. And if they do we are to let them have our cloak as well. Standing firm we can offer a simpler explanation of how we see things; put it another way; and rest content with that. We could hit out, argue, and allow our feelings to take over. But this is what the Lord warns us about.

"People who are in heavenly love" wrote Swedenborg, "ought not to delight in retaliation or revenge, but in doing good." (*Arcana Caelestia* 8223). This is the ideal which the Lord Himself first set before us in these words of His concerning non-resistance to evil. I repeat the point: it does not mean doing nothing about it, but our response is to be of a certain kind in a certain way.

The Swedenborg Programme – Number 34.

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