

Deuteronomy 19:15-21 Matthew 5:38-42 *What in the World is this about?* Michael Burkley, 9/11/22

It was twenty-one years ago today that four airplanes were captured by terrorists who crashed two of them into the World Trade center and one into the Pentagon but were prevented by the passengers from crashing the fourth into the Capital Building or the White House. There was a lot of hatred and a lust for vengeance in that time, not only for those who planned the attacks but for others. Shortly after the attack I remember speaking to a young woman whose father was a Sikh, a member of a religious group often persecuted by Muslims. He (and she) had been cursed in public and she shared that she worried every day if he would ever come back when he went out running.

Does our faith have anything to say about how we should act towards those terrorists *and* those who only might look like them? I think so, and the place to begin thinking about what we should do begins with our mistaken thoughts of the Old Testament Prophets.

We often think we know what the Old Testament prophets were all about, but we're also often wrong. We think that what was important was that they were a type of crystal ball to let us know the future. But if you would have asked them they would have told you that predicting the future was the least important part of their ministry. They were more interested in their present—in what was going on with the People of God. Unfortunately, what was usually happening was that the people were rebelling against God, dishonoring God and being unjust to the poor. They were NOT doing what Jesus said were the two most important things to do: To love God with all that they had and to love their neighbors as themselves (Matthew 22:35-40). That happened often enough that the Prophets had a standard way of dealing with the issue of God's People ignoring God. First, they would tell them just how they were breaking the covenant, the contract they had with God. Then they would tell them of how they would be disciplined for their rebellion (and discipline is different than punishment, for it brings hope for the future) and finally, God would tell them through the Prophet that when they repented of their sin and turned back to God that God would restore them back into fellowship with the Lord. Here's one example of that, though if you turn to any of the prophets in the Old Testament you can find lots more: Isaiah 1:10-20 (also see Proverbs 15:8-10). Why does God warn them when they're going wrong? Because God wants them to live in fellowship with him! That's the only reason to warn someone when they are going the wrong way – so they can turn around and be saved! That's what the Prophets were all about.

The Prophets weren't about revenge but about restoration. In Leviticus 19:18 and Deuteronomy 32:35 God says that we are not to seek vengeance against others but to love them instead. In other words, no destroying Hatfield and McCoy feuds). God, the one who does right, will make things right, for he says that it is his responsibility to avenge the wrong. Jesus shared in that desire for restoration of relationship, for transforming them from hostility to community, and that's why he said what he did in the passage from Matthew 5 that we read today.

He begins by saying, "You have *heard* it said..." Other places he says, "It is written..." –Matthew 4:4. What do you think is the difference?

2<sup>nd</sup>: This quote (Eye for an eye) *is* written in Exodus 21:24, in Leviticus 24:20, and in Deuteronomy 19:15-21. In all of those passages the context shows that that rule was written as guidance for public judgment by legal judges (what might that have to do with Jesus says, "You have heard it said"?)

3<sup>rd</sup>: Other than capital punishment for murder, there is no eye-poking-out for a poked-out eye in the Old Testament. In fact, look at Exodus 21:26,27 to see what was to happen if a slave had an eye or a tooth knocked out – and in Deuteronomy 15:13-14 to find out the further responsibility of that former slave owner),

Now with all of that...What might Jesus be teaching us here? Still confused? Keep on plugging away at it!

If someone strikes you on the *right* cheek...Why the emphasis on the right cheek? It was insulting to hit another person and they could be fined for that, but the penalty for backhanding someone was far worse, just as the insult was far worse. A strike on the *right* cheek was a terrible insult. When would an insult likely be given: in private or in public? What might turning the other cheek mean? Does it mean to let that person “walk all over you”?

Back then the average person had two pieces of clothing, an inner *tunic* (*other translations: shirt, coat*) which was worn under your outer *cloak* (*coat*). Jesus said, if someone sues you for your tunic give to him your cloak as well. It was illegal to permanently take someone’s cloak (Deuteronomy 24:10-13, Exodus 22:26, 27), so what do you think it meant when someone would sue you for your tunic?

If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. The most common person who could force you to go one mile back then was a Roman soldier. But they could only force you for one mile. Jesus says, go two. How could that change things?

Give to the one who asks of you? Is this a summary of the other three or perhaps something else?

Here are some other examples from the New Testament that might help you understand what’s happening in Jesus’ teaching. Romans 12:17-21 (what would burning coals put on your head do for you?), 1 Peter 3:9 (do not return evil for evil but with a blessing), and John 18:21-24 (if I did something wrong tell me, but if not, why strike me?).

Does this teaching have anything to do with war? With violent robbery? With terrorists crashing planes? Is Jesus saying here that if someone is trying to kill you, if a spouse is beating you, if a thief is robbing you, that you have to let them do it? I’m sure that’s not what he was teaching here. The New Testament says that the government holds a sword for a reason, to promote the good and to punish the bad. You don’t tickle people with a sword – you cut off their heads if necessary.

But that’s not what Jesus was talking about here. Here he was telling us how to react to insults, to attempts by people to treat us as if we weren’t people but things, to people who try to bend the law to benefit themselves rather than doing what’s right. Jesus was teaching us what to do when that happens to us. We are not to take revenge but do whatever we can, however uncomfortable it might be, to open their eyes so they might choose to do what is right instead of doing what is wrong. We might never get them to change, but Jesus says it’s important to try.

Those early followers of Jesus had no power in their society. They were the outcasts, the poor, the mostly uneducated, the ones who couldn’t claim any privilege of their own. So Jesus tells them how to seek justice when injustice is done to them. It might not work, but it might, and people would begin to see their fellow human beings as people rather than things to be used. In our society today there are still people who use others and treat them as things rather than people made in the image of God. We are still called to help them even if they aren’t us. I still pray for the young Sikh woman and her father whenever I think of them. But we are not in the same situation as those early Christians. We now have power to act not only for ourselves but for others. We can vote, we can use social media, we can speak out ourselves for others, and Jesus is here teaching us that we must, even, or perhaps especially, if there is a cost to be paid. What we do for others who have no one to fight for justice for them is not only doing what’s right for them but also we’re doing it to and for Jesus. What will we do the next time we see someone being treated as a thing instead of a person? I guess that will be a test of whether or not we’re listening to Jesus.