

# Go The Extra Mile

by John O. Reid (1930-2016)

*Forerunner, "Ready Answer," August 2006*

*"And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two."*

*—Matthew 5:41*

In Matthew 5:20, part of His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus Christ instructs, "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." He then goes on to expound the changes of attitudes and approaches to God's law that we must acquire to do just that, to exceed the righteousness of those very law-abiding people.

When He finished His sermon, the people were astonished, as He had taught them, not as the "letter of the law" scribes and Pharisees did, but "as one having authority" (Matthew 7:28-29). Jesus could preach with conviction and boldness because He saw past the rigid letter of God's commandments to their very spiritual heart and purpose. He could confidently give the law its true meaning and relevance to life.

In essence, Matthew 5—7 contain instructions from Jesus for them, and for us today, to go further than the strictly physical application of the law—to God's true intent in it, or as we say, from the letter to the spirit of the law. In His teaching, Jesus states a physical law, often quoting directly from the Old Testament. This base standard is to be met by all those who have made a covenant with God.

Then, He proceeds to amplify the particular law's meaning, usually beginning His amplification with words similar to, "I say to you. . . ." Such words should be a flag to us that Jesus is expanding the scope of the law to include, not just physical actions, but the condition, attitudes, and inclinations of a person's heart. In essence, He is teaching the standards required of His people to attain the Kingdom of God.

## Lex Talionis

In one section of the Sermon on the Mount—from which two or three of today's common proverbs have derived—He covers what is known as *Lex Talionis*, "the law of retaliation." We know this concept by its more familiar name, "an eye for an eye." Jesus says:

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away. (Matthew 5:38-42)

Some may have taken the Old Testament guideline (see Exodus 21:23-25) in a literal fashion. At first glance, it seems that, if a person's tooth or eye were lost in a scuffle or accident, the one who caused

the loss to happen would be required to forfeit his own tooth or eye. Though some may have demanded this in times past, it is clearly not God's intent for the law. Instead, it is a principle, given in concrete, understandable terms, that damage was to be justly compensated.

According to commentator Adam Clarke, the Jews of Christ's day abused this law to extract every last penny from another, and in the majority of cases, there was no mercy shown. Human nature being what it was then, and still is now, they insisted that the one who caused the problem receive every bit of punishment coming to him. In short, they wanted and exacted revenge!

Jesus wants us to understand that His disciples are not to act this way. We will study this section verse by verse to get the full force of Christ's explanation, in which He provides illustrations of His standard in action.

## **Beyond Retaliation**

In countering the faulty understanding of this Old Testament law, Jesus teaches, "But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also" (Matthew 5:39). He begins by instructing us not to escalate the situation by stubborn resistance or, worse still, by perpetrating an additional offense. Elsewhere, Paul writes, "Repay no one evil for evil" (Romans 12:17). If offended, do not offend in return. If injured, do not inflict an injury in payment. In other words, retaliation is not the answer.

Note that Jesus is not speaking of dangerous situations, like facing a robber with murderous intent or a rapist on a dark street. On His mind are circumstances of daily life that are insulting, bothersome, or even mildly injurious, but not life-threatening. *The Interpreter's Bible* comments on the latter half of the verse: "A blow with the back of the hand to the right cheek was an insult, thus the palm of the hand was now poised to bring a blow to the left cheek." The blow is struck contemptuously rather than homicidally.

In a situation like this, the first thing that comes to most minds is revenge! Jesus desires that, rather than avenging oneself and acting with the same attitude of hatred as the aggressor, we reflect our calling and suppress the urge to seek vengeance. We should even be willing to take a second slap, this one from the other's open hand, without retaliation. Such pacifism usually pours cold water on the situation, avoiding further tit-for-tat retribution.

Jesus continues, "If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also" (Matthew 5:40). Certainly, no one likes to be sued. It is a time-wasting, frustrating, chaotic legal mess. It is often a huge disruption of normal life, and for a Christian, a terrible distraction from our spiritual priorities. Our Savior advises us to nip the suit in the bud by taking the loss—and even adding a premium to it if it will settle matters before they get out of hand!

In I Corinthians 6, the apostle Paul faced a situation in which members of the church in Corinth were being taken to court by other members. He writes in verse 7, "Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather let yourselves be cheated?" Neither Jesus nor Paul means that a Christian should not use the law properly, but they are more interested in the right attitude in these matters. Many people take advantage of the legal system in a greedy, injurious manner, and Christians should not respond in kind. If confronted by such a person, it is usually better to suffer the loss of one's "shirt" than to fight back.

In Christ's example, He speaks of tunics and cloaks. The Jews of His day wore two principal garments, an interior "coat" or "tunic" (an undergarment), and a more costly exterior cloak (outer garment). This cloak was used, not only as a jacket or overcoat during the day, but also as a covering to sleep under at night. By Mosaic law, the outer cloak was an inalienable possession that could not be withheld from a debtor overnight (Exodus 22:26-27; Deuteronomy 24:12-13). Jesus is saying that, if we are sued even for a trifling amount, rather than countersuing and ratcheting up the hostility, we should be willing to give up what is rightfully ours to defuse the situation.

In Matthew 5:41, Jesus instructs, "And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two." His third example deals with the Roman practice of commandeering civilians or their property (mules, horses, oxen, camels, carts, wagons, etc.) to carry the luggage or other burden of military personnel for, in this case, one mile.

Evidently, the practice did not originate with the Romans but with the Persians. As there were no post offices at the time, and in order that royal orders might reach their destination quickly, Cyrus set up a system not unlike our Pony Express. A rider in this service was empowered to take a civilian's horse (usually his best or only horse), if his was worn out or lame. In addition, he could press a boat, cart, or any other vehicle into the king's service.

In recent centuries, this practice, often used to force seamen into the service of another nation's ships, has been called *impressment*. In America's Revolutionary War period, British ships would often intercept other nations' ships and force any American sailors found on them to work for the Royal Navy. In Roman times, a man could have worked all day, his family waiting for him to come in from his fields, and suddenly, a Roman soldier could order him to carry a heavy load for a mile.

No one likes to be made to do someone else's work. At the very least, we are apt to complain, argue, or simply refuse to be so used. Being compelled to engage in "community service" by law or by might is demeaning and perhaps unjust. But Jesus tells us to take the sting out of the situation by being willing to carry such a burden an extra mile in a cheerful attitude.

In a similar vein, Solomon advises, "If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for so you will heap coals of fire on his head, and the Lord will reward you" (Proverbs 25:21-22). Jesus says something very similar in His subsequent teaching (Matthew 5:44-45). Being struck, sued, or forced to carry a heavy load can bring out the worst in human nature: anger, resentment, outrage, and even violence. But when those who have been called find themselves in difficult and trying circumstances, their attitude must not be belligerent, spiteful, or vengeful, but helpful, willing, and good-natured. "Above and beyond" must be their motto.

## **A Generous Spirit**

Jesus gives a final illustration in Matthew 5:42: "Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away." Some commentators cannot understand why Jesus places this example with the other three, as it does not seem to show having a good attitude under trial.

However, having a godly attitude in parting with what we hold dear can be a test for us as well. The parallel scripture in Luke 6:30 shows that it follows the pattern of the previous illustrations: "Give to everyone who asks of you. And from him who takes away your goods do not ask them back."

Many believe that what Jesus requires here is foolish, that is, to give to everyone who asks of us and to allow our goods to be plundered without objection. Perhaps Luke 6:34-35 helps to clarify what Jesus intends:

And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive back, what credit is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Highest. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil.

His illustration in Matthew 5:42 deals with borrowing and lending, not with allowing oneself to be plundered. As in the other illustrations, His primary point is that it is preferable to suffer loss or harm than to retaliate or worsen the situation. When we give to someone in need, we should not expect to be repaid for our generosity, and we should certainly not take steps to force reimbursement. Christian charity should be done without expectation of gain. Yet, God sees, and He will show us favor: "He who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord, and He will pay back what he has given" (Proverbs 19:17).

If a person asks for a loan of money or goods, we should approach the request assuming that he makes it in good faith, if there are no extenuating reasons to doubt his sincerity. We should, however, keep in mind other principles from God's Word, such as being good stewards of what God has given us, taking care of our own, not encouraging laziness or sustaining the idle, not supporting vices (alcohol, drugs, or other addictions), and not being a party to shady or dubious get-rich-quick schemes. Jesus' suggestion is that, if we do lend to others, we might as well consider that money to be gone forever. The struggle to regain it will probably not be worth the effort, not to mention the damage it could do to relationships and one's character.

In short, what does His final illustration require of us? It asks of us, not only that we should lend without suspicion and with no eye to profit, but that we also should have a generous spirit of outgoing concern for a brother or sister in need.

### **Pressed Into God's Service**

All of these examples deal with the attitude of one's heart in exhibiting patience and love, and Jesus' intent in them is to raise us above the righteousness of the Pharisees to the higher righteousness of God's calling.

In Jesus, we have the ultimate example in responding correctly, when He said, while hanging on the stake, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). Not long thereafter, Stephen, when faced with death at the hands of a mob of hateful Jews, rather than responding with epithets or seeking revenge, beseeched, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin" (Acts 7:60). Both had a generous spirit and a true love for their fellow man.

Matthew 5:41 speaks of being pressed into service to do a task for another. It might be good to remember that each of us has been pressed into the service of Almighty God and asked to go the extra mile. For most of us, our calling was unlooked for and perhaps even came at an inopportune time in our lives. Yet, a Higher Authority has put us into service to do a work. Have we taken on our burden and cheerfully gone an extra mile for God?

And beyond God Himself, in our marriages, in raising our children, in dealing with each other, and in interacting with those outside our fellowship, we should be doing all we can to go that extra mile. By doing so, we reflect the higher standards of God's law, the standard of truly loving God and each other. This attitude will take us far beyond the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.