

“If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two” Matthew chapter 5:41

This is from a passage in which Jesus teaches about how his disciples are to respond to evil. It comes down to, in the words of Peter “Don't repay evil with evil or insult with insult.” Or, as Paul says “Do not be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good.”

Our human nature rebels against this. When Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek or, when someone asks for our shirt to give him our coat as well, we feel as though we are being asked to let the wicked trample all over us without resistance.

Certainly, we are to resist the temptation to take revenge and in doing so continue the cycle of harm, and we are to demonstrate humility in the face of wickedness. To deny that would be to do violence to the plain meaning of this passage.

But does that mean that we should just let evil win? When we understand something of the culture of the time of Jesus, it becomes clear that this is not quite the case. For example, a Roman soldier in Jesus's time could demand that someone carry his load for one mile, but not two, or he would be in trouble with his superiors.

So Paul unpacks the principle for us by quoting the Old Testament. “Friends, do not avenge yourselves, but leave room for God's wrath, because it is written, “Vengeance belongs to me; I will repay,” says the Lord.” In doing kindness to one who hates us, he suggests, we will be “heaping burning coals on his head.” In “going the extra mile”, we are also bringing the person who is ill treating us under greater judgement eventually.

When we answer evil with good, we are making some robust statements. We are demonstrating that repaying violence with violence is not the only way, we are showing that the strength we have in Christ is of a different nature than that of the world, we are a witness to those who are persecuting us and we are leaving judgement in the hands of God rather than presuming to judge another ourselves.

Prayer

Father, you don't ask me to grovel in humiliation in the face of evil, but to stand strong in you, repaying evil with good in the hope that those who do evil against me will be turned from wickedness to faith in you. Some of your teachings are hard. My human nature wants to strike back when I am treated badly. Help me instead to leave room for you to deal with people who treat me badly with love and justice. In Jesus' name, amen.

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