

The Sermon on the Mount (Part 2)

The New People of God

Study 6 – The Radical Disciple

Introduction

There is no doubt that Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:38-42 is both deeply challenging and unsettling. Even when we make proper allowances for the context into which Jesus was speaking (and we must do so!), this passage challenges our self-centred attitudes and our 'rights culture' in a very profound way. How easy it is for us to make the words and actions of others a matter of personal rights or personal grievances. How hard it is for us not to respond to insults or unfair treatment or frustrating demands with angry retaliation or cold-hearted indifference. How uncomfortable we feel when Jesus tells us to 'turn the other cheek' or to 'give to the one who asks'. 'Yes, but...' we say and we are so quick to put in the exceptions to Jesus' words that we totally miss the radical call that He makes upon his followers.

On the other hand there is no doubt that Jesus' words in this passage have been totally misunderstood and applied in a way which is contrary to the way that Jesus intended. Both Tolstoy and Gandhi made this error, applying Jesus' teaching not only to the realm of personal life but also to the realm of public justice, thus setting Jesus' teaching against that of the Old Testament and of the New Testament letters. And even within the realm of personal daily life, how easily a misunderstanding of Jesus' words can lead to a foolish attitude to borrowing and lending (contrary to what Proverbs teaches) or a totally false and dangerous attitude toward the reality of crime and the need for personal safety. If those who deal with the homeless and destitute are to be believed, then the foolish and sentimental giving of cash to those who have problems with substance abuse is a major obstacle to their being given true and lasting help.

How then are we to understand and apply Jesus' teaching in this passage? And once again the answer must lie in reading the passage in its context, recognizing the limits of application of Jesus' words while at the same time asking the Lord by His Spirit to stir us up to be the kind of people that Jesus has called us to be.

Fundamentally we must note that Jesus' words were intended to correct the misuse and misapplication of Old Testament teaching and his teaching only applies to the area of personal relationships and responses and not to that of public justice.

Re-read Matthew 5:39-42.

4. What was Jesus' response to this personal revenge and pay-back mentality?

5. In what ways could Jesus' words be misunderstood:

a. If applied to the area of public justice?

b. In the realm of personal relationships?

6. Jesus gives four particular examples where believers should differ from the world in attitude and action. In the Judean context the slap on the cheek was a personal insult not a case of assault, the demanding of the cloak a legal demand in a law suite, the extra mile probably an example of the habit by Roman soldiers of commandeering civilian help and the request for money an instance of helping someone who had fallen on hard times. Given this context

a. What is Jesus not expecting from his followers?

b. What is He calling his followers to do?



Apply

1. How does Jesus' teaching challenge the prevailing attitude in our society?

2. In what way has this passage challenged or encouraged you?

3. How would you use this passage to commend Christianity to someone?