

Love Your Enemies

A Sermon by the Rev. Peter M. Buss, Jr.

In this sermon we will focus on a challenging section of the Bible. The words themselves are easy enough to understand, but the meaning--what the Lord is asking us to do, can easily elude us. We read from the Sermon on the Mount:

"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." (*Matthew 5:38-39*)

We can guess at the intended message: that the Lord wants us to respond to evil with something other than revenge or anger, but beyond that questions arise. Are we really meant to let evil run its course? Do we have to put up with the abuse other people inflict upon us? Fortunately, answers have been given. The Writings for the New Church come to our rescue and explain that we do not need to take these words too literally. There is an important message contained within, which teaches us a great deal about how to respond to injustice when we are the victims.

David and Saul

To begin thinking about the meaning we turn to the story of David and Saul (see *1 Samuel 26:5-12*). Saul was deeply jealous of David's success--so much so that he wanted to kill him. Twice during David's extended flight from Saul, he had the opportunity to kill Saul. We read about how David and Abishai came into the middle of Saul's camp one night and stood over Saul while he and the whole camp slept. Abishai, ever willing to please, asked David if he could take Saul's spear by his head, and thrust it through him, for as he said, "God has delivered your enemy into your hand" (*1 Samuel 26:8*). But David would not let him, saying, "who can stretch out his hand against the Lord's anointed, and be guiltless?" (*1 Samuel 26:9*).

David had the motive, the opportunity, and even the justification (by most people's standards), to kill Saul. But he didn't, because the Lord forbade it. He refused to repay evil with evil. Although he may have acted out of simple obedience (he may have **wanted** to kill Saul

even though he didn't), we can admire his steadfast character--especially in the context of a nation whose rule was: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth (see *Exodus* 21:23-25; *Leviticus* 24:17-20).

Looking within

In the New Testament we hear the Lord asking people to go the next step. Instead of just resisting revenge, He asks us not to resist evil. We are to *love* our enemies--to turn the other cheek. The interior message is that we need to master more than our actions and speech--we also need to notice the emotions and feelings, our thoughts, intentions and attitudes which cause us to act in certain ways. These are things of the internal realm, within our minds. In His request to "turn the other cheek" we are invited by the Lord to reflect on our reactions to evil when we see it--when we are the victims. Do we clench with anger and coil up, repay wrong for wrong? Or do we have the courage to resist that primal urge and hear the Lord asking us to be merciful instead of vengeful?

The urge to seek revenge

Like it or not, we are the center of our own universe. Although this does refer to our love of self, a love which the Lord wants us to work on, the main reason for bringing it up is that it speaks to our perspective in general. We know our own thoughts and intentions; we do not necessarily know those of other people. We feel the pain when someone says or does something cruel to us; we don't automatically perceive what's going on in the other person's mind. Because of this self-centered view, we have a natural and automatic surge of defensiveness when attacked. It takes an effort of will to rise above such an inclination to think about the thoughts and feelings of someone else.

Let me offer a couple of examples to give a context in which to think about this principle of overcoming our native perspective. If someone short-changes us at the checkout, it's easy to assume that person is incompetent. It takes more effort to reflect that the person may just have made a mistake. If someone lies to us knowingly, it's easy to insinuate all kinds of negative things about that person's spiritual character--maybe even say a few of them. It's harder to open ourselves up to think about the reasons the person lied, and how best

to deal with the situation. If someone insensitively yells at us for something we didn't do, our natural tendency is to yell back--to make sure he or she knows of the injustice. It takes more courage to explain the error calmly, and to hold no ill will towards the person. The list could go one and on. These things happen all the time.

Therefore we need the Lord's words of encouragement, reminding us to rise above our instinctive desire to repay injustice, and instead be moved to think about what's going on in other people's minds as we experience our own thoughts and emotions.

"Turn the other cheek"

The Lord knows He's asking a lot of us in this regard. It is difficult to counter cruelty with mercy. He explains this by means of the very words He chose during His Sermon on the Mount. The things He asks there intentionally go against our common sense--beyond what we would reasonably expect the Lord to ask of us. Think about what it means to "turn the other cheek." A person slaps you in the face. Such an act is an affront to our selfhood. It is a way of cutting someone to the core--of provoking us to almost certain anger. Yet the Lord says in effect, "Let him slap you again."

The rest of the requests are equally as alarming if we think about actually doing what the Lord says. If someone wants your clothes, He asks you to give them up. If someone needs to borrow money, He asks you to lend without expecting repayment. He commands us all to give any of our possessions to anyone who asks. The reason for this imagery is to make us aware that it is not easy to overcome our desire for revenge. It is not something we would tend to do, if left to ourselves.

There is a deeper reason, of course. It comes by means of the internal sense or the meaning which is contained in each of the words and images. A passage from the Writings for the New Church explains:

Who can fail to see that these words should not be taken literally? Who is going to turn his left cheek to one who has smacked him on the right cheek? Who is going to give his cloak to one who wishes to take away his tunic? Who is going to give what he has to all who ask for it? And who will not resist evil?

But these words cannot be understood by anyone who does not know that the right cheek and the left, tunic and cloak, a mile, a loan, and all the rest are being used to mean. The subject in these verses is spiritual life or the life of faith, not natural life, which is the life of the world. (*Arcana Caelestia* 9049:5; cf. *Apocalypse Explained* 556:8)

Spiritual life is the key. Again the Lord is asking us to focus on what's going on in our minds- our intentions, affections, thoughts, attitudes. When someone insults us what happens to our spiritual life? What causes us to react in a merciful or vengeful way? This is what comes out by means of the internal sense.

Spiritual associations

A major idea is contained within the Lord's introduction to His message: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'" (*Matthew* 5:38). This again is the law of retaliation. It is the exact opposite of the Golden Rule which the Lord spoke of later in the same address: "Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them" (*Matthew* 7:12; *Luke* 6:31). The truth contained within is that one is the law of heaven, while the other is the law of hell. In heaven, people are motivated by mutual love, or charity--they do to others as they want others to do to them (see *Apocalypse Revealed* 762).

But devils in hell place themselves first, desiring to abuse and manipulate those around them. When it doesn't work they commit acts of violence and cruelty. But the law of retaliation takes effect, and whatever they do to others comes crashing back on them in the form of punishments (*Ibid.*). By such means the Lord maintains some semblance of order in the hells.

The power of such a teaching is that it opens up a reality never before known. In the lessons we read about our spiritual associations (see *Arcana Caelestia* 4067). We are in the presence of spirits and angels right now. The spiritual world, the realm of the afterlife, is full of people who once lived on earth. The Lord uses them to lead us. Every single thing we think and feel is caused by our association with certain spirits. We are present with spirits who like to think and feel the same way we do, even though we are entirely unaware of it.

The passage gave some examples. A covetous person is in association with covetous spirits; a person who loves himself pre-eminently is with those who share this self-pride; one who takes delight in revenge (an emotion particularly appropriate in this context) is among spirits who feed that desire. It also mentions that people who avoid such vices are in association with angels in heaven, and are thereby led by the Lord Himself.

With this backdrop we can think again about our response to evil or insensitivity. When we react with anger or vengeance it is *never* from the Lord. When we repay anger with anger, violence with violence, then we are acting under the law of retaliation--the law that governs hell. The result is that we are in association with devils in hell, and as the passage from *Arcana Caelestia* explains:

[We are] utterly under their control, so much so that [we are] not under [our] own jurisdiction but under theirs, [even though we imagine] from the delight [we experience], and so from the freedom [we have], that [we are] in control of [ourselves]."

(*Arcana Caelestia* 4067)

Only when we reflect on the fact that there's more going on than our own emotions and thoughts, that someone else is involved, that there may be reasons for his or her actions--then we open ourselves up to charity, to thoughts about how we would want to be treated if the roles were reversed; then we are in association with angels of heaven and we are led by the Lord.

This is an amazing new truth which gives us a totally new way of approaching our dealings with other people. Our goal is to be led by the Lord and His angels, rather than to fall into the traps of hell.

Specific requests

With this backdrop of our connection with the spiritual world, we can look at a few of the phrases of the Lord's words, and see clearly what the Lord is asking us to do:

(1) "Do not resist an evil person", He says.

What He means is "Don't repay evil with evil." Why? Because it will never help. All it does is bring us into association with the

hells. Their desire is to hurt us and control us. If we respond to their impulses we suffer. We can think of anger as an example. It is a powerful emotion. We may derive some delusional pleasure from "letting someone have it," but more often than not we end up feeling remorseful and guilty. It doesn't lead anywhere good.

(2) "Turn the other cheek"

Our goal, then, is to avoid such consequences. The first way to do so is "to turn the other cheek." A "cheek" represents an interior understanding of the truth (see *Apocalypse Explained* 556:9; cf. *Arcana Caelestia* 9049:6). When we truly understand the Lord's request to resist vengeful motions, we will see that He is asking us to respond from a charitable perspective. "Striking the cheek" represents a desire to destroy (*Ibid.*). When someone steals from us, or is cruel, the Lord asks us *not* to strike back--not to desire to destroy. Instead our goal is to respond from that interior understanding which is "the other cheek"--from an interior affection of love towards the neighbor. Such is the meaning of His words which follow: "love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you" (*Matthew* 5:43).

In this we see a tremendous challenge--to overcome that instinctive reaction and to act from a higher motive instead; to take influx from heaven rather than hell; to think about the other person--the one who is abusing us--from respect, as a person; to ask ourselves how the Lord would want us to respond. Once we've considered these things then we can react. It may be with zeal, or with a desire to clarify the cause for the confrontation, or with a decision to remove ourselves from the situation. Whatever our response actually is, it must be from charity, and so from heaven.

(3)"If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also"

Again the Lord knows that is hard. It is our goal, but we may not always succeed. So the Lord offers a starting point in the next sentence: "If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also" (*Matthew* 5:40). A "cloak"

represents an external understanding of the truth, as opposed to the internal understanding represented by a "cheek" (see *A.E.*556:9; *Arcana Caelestia* 9049:6). What the Lord asks here is that we obey, even if we don't feel like it. If we can't bring ourselves to respond to our "adversary" from a genuinely charitable attitude, then obedience is a place to begin. We may want to respond with anger or revenge, but the Lord asks us not to. It might be useful to think again of David and Saul. David had the opportunity to kill Saul, his enemy, but he did not, because the Lord forbade it.

(4) "And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two"

Still, such external obedience should not be our home-base. It is just a starting point. The Lord wants us to work towards the goal of genuine mercy and forgiveness. He says so in the last phrase we'll look at today: "And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two" (*Matthew* 5:41). Going the extra mile represents our willingness to work towards the goal of charity. The more we resist our urge to repay wrong for wrong, the more the Lord will lead us towards control to such a degree that we feel nothing but affection for those in disorder.

This doesn't mean we have to feel happy for them. But it does mean we feel concern, and respond with the idea of helping the situation rather than making it worse. If we do so, then we are on the road to experiencing love towards the neighbor as the angels of heaven do.

In Conclusion

The Lord asks us not to resist evil. In the internal sense He explains that evil has it's own punishment (see *Apocalypse Revealed* 762). He asks that we avoid being affected by someone else's wrongdoing to such a degree that we drop to their level of operation. All it does is cause us to receive influx from hell.

Instead He says, "Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you" (*Matthew* 5:44). The overriding rule is to do to others as we would have them do to us. If we heed this rule and hold it up as our

goal, then we will be "sons of the Father in heaven" (*Matthew 5:45*). In other words, the Lord will be leading us. He will protect us from harm, and evil will not have its intended effect on us. We won't respond with anger or vengeance because the source of our response will be heaven rather than hell. As the passage from *Arcana Caelestia* says:

As [we allow ourselves] to be led to good which is more interior and more perfect, so [we are] conveyed [by the Lord] to more interior and more perfect angelic societies. (*AC4067*)

Into these societies we will come after death, if we make mutual love or charitable regard for others, our rule of life.

Amen.

Lessons: Matthew 5:38-48; 1 Samuel 26:5-12; Arcana Caelestia 4067