

THE PRINCIPLE OF DYING TO SELF

MATTHEW 5:38-42

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Today we come to the fifth in a series of six illustrations given to help people understand how a person's righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law if that person hopes to enter into the kingdom of heaven. Each one of these illustrations deals with an issue that is controversial in nature. The issues we have discussed so far are the issues of killing and adultery and divorce and lying. All those issues are controversial. People in the time of Christ debated these issues, and people today continue to debate about these issues.

Now, in dealing with these issues, the Pharisees and teachers of the law went to great lengths to define for the people what kinds of behavior were right and what kinds of behavior were wrong. The righteousness of the Pharisees required people to abide by their definitions of right and wrong.

But Jesus taught that our righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees. We will never get into the kingdom of heaven by just following a set of rules made by a group of religious leaders, because that is not how a person gets into heaven. If it were possible to get to heaven that way, then the Pharisees had it right.

But our Lord's approach to righteousness was entirely different. Instead of emphasizing a set of rules, He gave us principles to live by. In effect, Jesus said, 'If you want to get into heaven, you must live by principles instead of living by a set of rules. That is the only way for your righteousness to exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees.'

Now the big challenge we face with Christ's teaching is that it is much harder to live by principles than it is to live by the rules. Take, for example, the issue of lying. The Pharisees were able to define for the people what kinds of lying were wrong and what kinds of lying were OK. They actually set up a system where it was possible for some people to go through life with a passing grade. But Jesus denounced the system set up by the Pharisees and gave us a principle. Simply stated, the principle tells us never to lie. It doesn't matter what the circumstances, we must never let our 'yes' mean

anything other than 'yes' and our 'no' mean anything other than 'no.'

It is not hard to see how the principle is far more difficult to obey than the set of rules. Whereas it is possible for some people to get a passing grade with a set of rules about lying, it is virtually impossible for a person to go through life without ever lying. It is something that can only be done with God's grace. Without the power of the Holy Spirit living in a person's life, it is impossible to obey this principle or any of the other principles given to us by Jesus in these six illustrations recorded in the fifth chapter of MATTHEW.

This is especially true when it comes to the principle of dying to self. Abiding by the principle of dying to self goes against our fallen nature. Today we are going to take a careful look at this principle, and I think you will agree with me that it is absolutely impossible to live up to the principle of dying to self without the grace of God.

I will now invite you to turn in your Bibles to MATTHEW 5:38-42. As with the other illustrations we have already seen, this one begins with Jesus quoting the teaching of the Pharisees about a particular subject. In this case the subject is how we should treat other people who have harmed us in some way. This quote is then followed by our Lord's own teaching on the subject. Here, as with the other examples, Jesus teaches by laying down a principle. In this case, it is the principle of dying to self that Jesus wants us to understand. Let's now read the passage.

³⁸You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' ³⁹But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴²Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

Let's first consider the teaching of the Pharisees by contrasting it with the teaching of the Old Testament. The phrase, "Eye for eye and tooth for tooth" is indeed a quote taken from the Old Testament. So the problem with this saying is not a problem of misquoting; rather, it is a problem of taking the quote out of context and giving it a meaning it was never meant to have.

The first time the saying appears in the Old Testament is EXODUS 21:24, right after God gave the children of Israel the Ten Commandments. We can sum up the Ten Commandments with the words, "Love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself (MATTHEW 22:37-39)."

Right after God gave the children of Israel the Ten Commandments, He also gave them a rather detailed set of rules that theologians divide into civil laws and ceremonial laws. The reason why the people needed these laws in addition to the moral laws had to do with the fallen nature of man. Ceremonial laws were given to teach the children of Israel the importance of holiness and that achieving holiness depends entirely upon God's grace. If the children of Israel had no fallen nature, they would not need laws telling them to make animal sacrifices on an altar to teach them that sin can only be forgiven by God through the shedding of blood. If the children of Israel had no fallen nature, there would be no need for civil laws to keep them in check when they disobeyed the moral law, because they would never disobey the moral law.

But they did have a fallen nature, and they did disobey. So civil law was needed and "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" is a quote from the civil law. And now we must understand how this particular civil law kept the people who belonged to the nation of Israel in check. Why would such a civil law need to be written? It was needed, because there is a tendency in the fallen nature of man to seek revenge or retaliation that goes far beyond the injury that has been inflicted.

The purpose of this Mosaic legislation was to provide punishment that would fit the crime and not be in excess of the crime. Without such law a man who had his eye knocked out might seek to kill the person who knocked out his eye. The civil law kept things in check. It told the children of Israel, 'only an eye for an eye and nothing more.' This law insisted that there be a correspondence between the crime and the punishment. That is the first thing it did.

The second thing the law did was to recognize the authority of judges. The law is also recorded in LEVITICUS 24:20 and DEUTERONOMY 19:21. In DEUTERONOMY we see another very significant thing about this law. The people who were to carry out the law were not individuals; rather, they were the people appointed to be judges. A system of judges was set up among the children of Israel. And when disputes and matters arose, the people had to take them to these responsible authorities for judgment. This Mosaic legislation that restricted punishment so that it would not be in excess of the crime was not given to the private individual. It was given to the judges. They were the ones to make sure that it was an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth and no more.

Now the Pharisees took these words out of their context and completely ignored the fact that this teaching was for the judges only. They made it a matter of personal application. And beyond that, they taught the people that it was their right and duty to have 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. According to the Pharisees, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' was something people should insist upon, rather than something that should cause them to restrain themselves.

The original legislation was intended to be a negative restraint: 'When carrying out punishment, don't go beyond an 'eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. The Pharisees changed the negative restraint into a positive mandate: 'If you have been hurt, it is now your duty to hurt back.' The original legislation was to be carried out by appointed judges who were responsible for law and order. But the Pharisees interpreted the legislation to mean that individuals were supposed to carry it out themselves.

So, again, we see a contrast between the teaching of the Old Testament and the teaching of the Pharisees. And now we must turn to the teaching of our Lord. The principle He gives is found in the first part of verse 39. Jesus said, "Do not resist an evil person." This simple statement is one of the most misunderstood statements in the New Testament. Pacifists who oppose going to war under any circumstance will quote this verse. Some people have even interpreted this verse to mean that there should be no police force, because police are trained to resist people who are evil.

The main problem with this kind of interpretation is that it takes a principle intended for a Christian individual and tries to apply it to a whole community or to a nation. When Jesus

said, "Do not resist an evil person," His words were never intended to be used by a nation in developing its foreign policies.

Leaders of nations do choose to resist other leaders of nations whom they consider to be evil. They go to war with these leaders and their armies with the expressed purpose of doing away with the evil so the people can be liberated. That is the basic rationale given to justify the wars waged by our country both now and in the past. When Jesus said, "Do not resist an evil person", He was not saying that a president or a king should not wage war on a country led by an evil person. There may be very good reasons to oppose a war, but this verse of scripture should never be used in a debate on war.

This verse of scripture is meant to be a principle to be used by every individual. And as we look at the words our Lord used to explain the principle, you will see how it is virtually impossible to live by this principle unless you are a Christian. Without the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, it is impossible to practice the principle of dying to self.

Jesus used four illustrations to explain the principle of dying to self. Jesus did not give us a complete list covering every possible situation in which human beings find themselves. That is not the way Jesus taught people. Instead, He gave illustrations to help us understand a principle. We, then, must apply the principle to every situation.

The first illustration deals with the question of turning the other cheek. "But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." What does this illustration teach us about dying to self? When an evil person attacks us, what is our natural reaction? It is one of retaliation. On September 11, 2001 I sat in my office and listened to the radio. The radio station I was listening to was taking calls from the general public as they expressed their reaction to what had just happened. Many of the people who called in were demanding some kind of retaliation. When we are hurt, it is natural for us to desire to defend ourselves and to revenge ourselves for any injury or wrong that is done to us.

But now, Jesus tells us that we must rid ourselves of the spirit of retaliation. "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord (ROMANS 12:19)." It is hard to rid oneself from the spirit of retaliation. It requires dying to self. Shortly after I became a Christian, I was severely tested in this area. My sister was beaten and taken

advantage of sexually by the man she lived with. My natural reaction after hearing the news was to take revenge. I began to think about the next time I would meet up with this fellow and how I would punch his lights out for doing what he had done to my sister. But God wanted something different. He wanted me to learn how to die to myself in this area of seeking retaliation. It was not easy, but God did give me the grace to rid myself of the spirit of revenge and retaliation. The day came when I did meet up with the man who abused my sister, and God helped me to keep my emotions in check. He allowed me to have pity on that wretched fellow who was in bondage to the influence of drugs. He gave me the grace to die to self so that I could pray for him instead of striking him.

But I must be careful what I say at this point. You may conclude by what I am saying that it is wrong for a Christian to take action against violent people. Please don't come to that conclusion. That is not what our Lord is trying to teach us. We have a duty to take action against people who are out of control. If I were in the room at the time when that man was abusing my sister, it would have been my duty to do everything in my power to stop him. The Lord is trying to teach us what our spirit and attitude toward evil people should be. Once the wrong has been done, we must not be driven by a spirit of revenge. We must not strike back with the purpose of defending our honor. But when the wrong is in the process of taking place and the evil person is out of control and doing harm to himself and other people, then we must do everything in our power to restrain that person.

The second illustration our Lord used is that of the cloak and the tunic. Jesus said, "And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well." Here Jesus is concerned with our tendency to insist upon our rights. According to Jewish law, a man could never sue a person for his outer cloak. But it was legitimate to sue a man for his inner tunic. But Jesus said, when a person sues you for your inner tunic, instead of putting up a fight, give him your outer cloak as well.

The world we live in is extremely self-centered, and it is becoming more self-centered with each passing day. The average man today thinks that he deserves more than what he has gotten, and the moment he can take advantage of an opportunity to get his pound of flesh, he will do it. It is this kind of selfish attitude that Jesus is confronting. The man of the world will use fire to fight fire. When a person is suing him for

a large sum, the average man will fight back with a counter lawsuit. He will find a lawyer who will put up a counter attack to win back the money or reputation he feels that he has lost. He will fight for his own personal rights.

Giving up what we feel to be our personal rights as individuals is extremely hard to do. This is probably best illustrated in a marriage relationship. When a husband or a wife is out of fellowship with God, he or she tends to be absolutely cruel to his or her spouse. Now the Bible teaches us that when this happens, the burden of yielding rights falls upon the one who is walking close to the Lord. That husband or wife needs to be willing to yield his or her rights in such a situation. This teaching comes across clear in 1 PETER 3. If the husband refuses to honor his wife the way he should, the wife needs to yield her rights to be honored for the sake of saving her husband. When the wife refuses to follow her husband's lead the way she should, then the husband needs to yield his rights for the sake of saving his wife. There are husbands who would disagree with me on this point and force their rebellious wives to obey, even if they must use violence to do so. I know some husbands who feel it is absolutely Biblical to beat their rebellious wives into submission.

This week Janiene shared with me a touching story about a certain wife with a husband who was out of fellowship with God. He did not beat his wife, but in his clouded state of thinking, this husband forbid his wife from doing the thing she cherished the most; and by doing so, he failed to honor her. He knew she looked forward all year to attending a certain gathering of Christians, so he told her she was not permitted to attend. Now she had every right to attend, but she yielded her rights. It was that very act of yielding that melted her husband's stubborn heart and caused him to come to Christ.

It is in the marriage relationship that dying to self by yielding our personal rights is needed the most. And it is also in the marriage relationship where dying to self is the most difficult thing to do. The closer the relationship we have with people, the more difficult it is to yield our personal rights when we feel taken advantage of. Those of you who have young children who are close in age know very well what I mean. There is something about our fallen nature that makes it very difficult to yield our rights. And siblings demonstrate their fallen nature every day as they fight over things they consider to be rightfully theirs.

But now I have to add another word of caution, because this illustration Jesus used to teach us about dying to self is sometimes abused. Whereas we must be willing to yield our personal rights, we must not make the mistake of applying the same principle to situations where truth is being challenged. When people are challenging the truth, we are obliged to defend the truth. Our Lord's admonition to yield only applies when our personal rights are being challenged, not when truth is being challenged.

JOHN 18:22-23 records the story of an officer striking Jesus on the face with the palm of his hand, saying, "Is this the way you answer a high priest?" In that case Jesus did not yield. He did not turn the other cheek. He protested. The officer was out of order. He was breaking the law; and Jesus, with His protest, was doing what He could to uphold the law. The Christian is not to be concerned with personal insult and personal defense. But when it comes to defending law and order and truth, the Christian is obliged to say something or do something, even if it means his death in doing so.

There are thousands of Christians in Mainland China who have spent many years in prison. They understand this truth more than we can possibly know. Right now we must do our best to understand the difference between standing up for the truth and yielding to our personal rights. Some day we may find ourselves in a position where we, like many martyrs of the past, must risk our lives to defend truth.

The next illustration Jesus used to explain the principle of dying to self has to do with going the extra mile. Jesus said, "If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles." This illustration deals with our tendency to resist the demands placed on us by governments and ruling authorities. At the time Jesus spoke these words, the Roman army was in control of the Jews. The common practice of the army was to force people to carry the army's luggage and supplies from one point to another point. They would stop a person in the middle of whatever he was doing and command him to pick up the luggage and move it to some point down the road. At that point they would then force another poor soul to do the same. This was the privilege a conqueror had over the people he conquered, and the Roman soldiers often exercised their privilege.

Now here again Jesus is dealing with our selfish attitudes that resent the demands placed upon us by government. We don't like

certain laws. We resent the high taxes we must pay. We look for ways of getting around laws we don't like. We hire lawyers who will find loopholes so we can pay less tax. Jesus says that we must die to ourselves and rid ourselves of such selfishness. The government that is in charge is sanctioned by God to do the things we feel make our lives miserable. And because God sanctions it, we are obliged to obey. And we should not only obey; we should also be willing to go the extra mile. By doing so, people will notice that we are different and we will gain an opportunity to witness. Imagine the situation where a Jewish citizen who is forced to stop what he is doing to carry a heavy load down the road to a certain point. Upon arrival at the destination, he turns to the soldier and says, "Let me carry help you again by going another mile." In all likelihood that soldier would take notice and wonder what was in the person to make him so different. In the face of government rules that make our lives miserable, we must die to ourselves.

But again, there is a word of caution. Jesus did not mean to imply that we should never try to change laws that are unjust. In a country such as ours where citizens have a right to influence change in laws that are unjust, we should exercise our right, but we should do it within the boundaries of the law. The challenge is to be able to discern the difference between lobbying for justice and lobbying for change that will make our personal lives more comfortable at the expense of other people.

The last illustration Jesus used to drive home the principle of dying to self has to do with the business of giving and lending. "Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you." Here Jesus is dealing with the human tendency to think about self first and others second. Driven by a self-centered spirit that tells us we can only give from our surplus, we are reluctant to help those who are in real need. When we have money to spare, giving or lending is not that hard to do. But most of us come to a point beyond which we are unwilling to give because the risk is too great and it might cause us to suffer. It is this tendency to hold on to what is mine that Jesus wants us to give up.

This does not mean that we are to give unwisely. Jesus is not encouraging us to be taken in by frauds or professional beggars who will use the money to hurt themselves and others. We must think carefully what we are

doing. If someone is in need, it is our business to help that person, even if it means taking a risk.

With each one of these illustrations, Jesus emphasized one principle. It is the principle of dying to self. Giving up the tendency we have to retaliate and letting go of personal rights and yielding to government laws that make life uncomfortable and giving what we have to the needy even at the risk putting ourselves in a dangerous position—all this and more is what it means to die to self.

Can you see now what I mean when I said at the beginning of this message how this principle is absolutely impossible to apply to our lives without the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit? Only the love of God living inside of us can compel us to die to ourselves so we can live for God. 2 CORINTHIANS 5:15 sums it all up: "And He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for Him who died for them and was raised again."

Take the principle and apply it to every area of your life, and your life will be full of meaning, and you will discover new power to witness. I wish I could say I have died to myself in every area of my own life, but I know better than to say that.

Last week I read the testimony of Gloria Matthews whose worse nightmare came true when Jonelle, her 12-year-old daughter, was abducted from her home in 1984. Between the time her daughter returned home from school and the time her husband came home from work (about an hour) someone broke into the house and took Jonelle away. The parents did everything they were supposed to do in a situation like that. They immediately contacted the police. A massive search took place. Bloodhounds sniffed the property while helicopters scoured the surrounding area. Peter Jennings aired a video of Jonelle singing in her school choir that very day. Photos were sent everywhere. Their church and churches around the country and even around the world began to pray. But the weeks turned into months and the months turned into years, and to this day, there is still no clue as to what happened to Jonelle Matthews. In her testimony, Gloria shared about her inner struggle. For years she could not accept the fact that she may never know what happened to her daughter. In her mind she had every right as a mother to know. And no one, not even God Himself, could take that right away. But the day finally came when she was willing to die to herself and yield even this right to God. On December 20, 1994, the Matthews

family had a memorial service for Jonelle. It was their way, not only of saying good-bye to their daughter, but of also saying to God, "We're letting her go now. She's yours." And I wonder if the same thing happened to me, could I die to myself and continue to joy in my salvation, or would I become a bitter person.

Job had to make that choice after he lost his wife and children and property and health. He asked the question, "why?" In the end, God did not give him a direct answer, but God did teach him to die to himself. And God is calling us to do the same. Yield to His calling. Allow His Spirit to take control. It is impossible to do it alone. We need Him.