

SOMETHING TO CHEW ON

Each time one reads the Sermon on the Mount with the intention of taking Christ's words seriously, one is disturbed, even upset. This is particularly true if the reader is a "modern" man, who has learned to value the practical approaches to human problems and tends to rely on "common sense." This is particularly true, because Christ's moral statements in the Sermon on the Mount vary with "common-sense" approaches.

To "love your enemies" is utter nonsense to military strategists who keep the peace with a balance of power, one side maintaining equal destructive capability with the other. To "turn the other cheek" sounds like an invitation to the unscrupulous to take advantage of me in my goodness. What is the difference between this attitude and my being a "door mat"?

In essence, the common-sense attitude is saying this: You can't deal with wicked men by always being ideally good. You have to compromise a little, play the game according to their rules to some extent. If not, you are just stupid and will not survive in this world much longer.

But the whole point of Christ's word is that there can be no compromise with the world as it is. Christ is not suggesting that we adjust to the world as it is, but that we overthrow the world! Revolution is his command, not collusion. Practical? Hardly. This is radical and bold. Most of Christ's statements sound radical to us because we do not have his faith in the power of love to conquer hatred, the power of forgiveness to conquer my enemy's desire to injure me. With that faith, a kind of logic emerges from the Sermon.

If I live by the principle "an eye for an eye," all my enemies remain my enemies and all my friends are potential enemies. If A is the enemy of B, and B will not forgive A, but invokes the principle of retaliation, then A and B are enemies for ever. If A is a friend of C, and C (because he is human and fallible) wrongs A, then C and A are also enemies for ever.

And, theoretically speaking, because we are all human and hurt even our dearest ones at some time, we would alienate everyone in the universe if given enough time, and hence be completely alone - all mankind would be against us and we against them. This is the ultimate logical end of living consistently by the principle of retaliation.

As a matter of fact, however, we do not live consistently by that principle. We live by it some of the time, and it is because we live by it some of the time that we find the basic human problems of man relating to man.

Jesus is arguing that the only way to have peace in all the universe and restore harmony to all God's creation is to live with a radical kind of love, a love that breaks through the hostility of my enemy and changes my enemies into friends. On this programme, every friend remains a friend for ever, and every enemy becomes a potential friend. The problem is that only people who live by faith in the power of God's love will risk such a life. People will take advantage of you; you will be stepped on and humiliated. There is no guarantee that everyone will respond to such a dramatic love.

But God has promised that in the end, when the judgement sits, love will conquer hatred; and all the universe will kneel and confess that Jesus Christ, whose very essence is love, is the true Lord and ultimate authority in all things.

"Let Christ himself be your example as to what your attitude should be. "Who, being in the nature of God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made

himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant; And, as a man he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even the cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father. Philippians 2:5-11.

It is because God loves us that He insists on our living a life of radical love, a love that is like His own.

To ask that God's love should be content with us as we are is to ask that God should cease to be God: because He is what He is, His love must, in the nature of things, be impeded and repelled by certain strains in our present character, and because He already loves us He must labour to make us lovable. We cannot even wish, in our better moments, that He could reconcile Himself to our present impurities." When we fall in love, do we cease to care whether our partner is clean or dirty, fair or foul? Do we not rather then first begin to care? Does any woman regard it as a sign of love in a man that he neither knows nor cares how she is looking? Love may, indeed, love the beloved when her beauty is lost: but not because it is lost. Love may forgive all infirmities and love still in spite of them: but Love cannot cease to will their removal."

So many assume that God's requests pertaining to our behaviour are parental whims, immature assertions of authority over us, when in fact they are the strict demands of one who loves us perfectly. This was the lesson that the rich young ruler needed to learn. Christ made it clear to him that only the surrender of all his possessions would fit him for eternal life.

He coveted his money, and a radical solution was the only one that would free him from his sin. He needed to love people, not things. How might he learn to love people? Christ's answer was, Focus your existence on people, not things, and in the act of giving all to the poor because you trust me, love for others will be born. Take that first step of obedience. Do what radical love requires.

This is the beginning of learning to love as God loves. There was no other alternative for the wealthy ruler. "If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off."

Perfect, mature, fully developed, self-denying love is the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount. To live by this radical love requires faith, a trusting of the ultimacy of love. It alone will solve the problem of sin. Evil cannot for ever withstand the power of love. Evil will seek to destroy it, knowing that here is its mortal enemy. Were a person or a people to live this way, they would most certainly offend the majority. They would be all we want to be but are unwilling to be.

God is waiting for such a people, and when He has them, He will take full command and the power of love will vindicate His character before all the creation.

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