

“Turning the Other Cheek”

A sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish
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“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. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.” ~ Matthew 5:38-42

The pure spirit of non-violence and non-judgmental charity expressed here (and throughout the Lord’s Sermon on the Mount) is something people have admired for centuries as a Christian ideal. And it certainly is a heavenly quality not to retaliate when we are offended. But must we tolerate abuse? Can we not defend ourselves against disorders that may be imposed on us? Isn’t punishment necessary to deter crime?

The challenge of the Lord’s teaching is clearly one of understanding. What does it really mean? After all, the Lord Himself said in another context that He had not come to bring peace but a sword, and that His teaching would set even family members against each other (Matt. 10:34). So there have to be some deeper spiritual principles involved here. What are they?

Well, in the New Church of course we turn to the symbolism, or, as we say, the spiritual sense of the Lord’s words. This is not complicated, nor is it far-fetched, nor is it some arbitrary way of understanding things to suit our pre-conceived ideas. There is nothing more normal and ordinary than for us to use metaphors and symbols in our language, and this is especially true in the profound, often poetic teachings of the Word. Think, for example, of those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness,” or the Old Testament imagery of all Israel as the Lord’s wife or even a harlot going after other gods. Sometimes the spiritual sense is obvious, as in the New Testament parable of the sower, and sometimes it is more subtle, as in stories of blindness or conquest or captivity. But once in a while the teachings of the Word just scream at us for some intelligent way to understand, almost forcing us to think more deeply. Our text today is one of those cases.

So let’s think about the imagery of the mouth and face. There are two main things involved here, having to do with thoughts and affections. Since the mouth is the means by which we introduce natural food to the body it is a symbol for that part of the mind we use to introduce spiritual food, or knowledge, to the mind. This includes taste, or discernment about what is good for us, that is, what is true or false, and the ability to “chew on it,” that is, to think and reason about it. The Lord used similar imagery when He referred to “speaking in new tongues,” meaning with new ideas, or a new understanding. As for the face in general, obviously facial expressions are all about affections or emotions. When the Word says, “May the Lord make His face to shine upon you” it is clearly not referring to some sort of natural glow: it is His Divine love shining through.

In our text the Lord begins by referring to the old saying about “an eye for an eye” and “a tooth for a tooth.” The function of the eye corresponds to understanding, and the function of the teeth to reasoning. So if there is some misunderstanding, shall we respond with even more misunderstanding? Of course not! And if there is some insult to our sense of reason, shall we respond

with equally hurtful reasoning? Of course not! We need to make room for empathy, patience and compassion in our response to abuse. After all, who knows where it’s coming from, that is, what hurt or shame or misinformation may be driving it. Better, first, to inquire than to fight back: “If you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5:23). Again, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you will have gained your brother” (Matt. 18:15). The force of the words “tell him” in the original language really means “inquire of him;” in other words, don’t accuse, but plead your case: have a conversation.

However then the Lord says, “I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.” What can THIS mean? – surely not that when abused we are obliged to actively invite more abuse!

Interestingly there’s not much said in revelation about the cheeks, but since they cover the bones of the jaw we can get a sense of what they mean from other references to the jaw. In fact, the original Greek for the word here translated “cheek” really means jaw, or jaw bone, and this of course is the framework for our teeth and for the function of speech and chewing. And since teeth correspond to the power of reasoning, or, we might say, analysis, breaking things down for “digestion” by the understanding, the jaw bone, which is more interior and gives the teeth their power, corresponds to a more interior perception and understanding (AE 556:9). We might even say that it corresponds to the doctrinal *framework* for our thought, the set of underlying assumptions that *guide* our thinking and make it effective.

Remember the story of Samson killing a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of an ass (Judges 15:15)? Philistines in general represent faith alone, and especially the false reasoning that justifies a life of faith without charity. That Samson used a donkey’s jawbone as a weapon against these people represents the application of true principles of rational thought that we can use to fight against and overcome false ones – even against incredible odds.

What, then, can it mean to “turn the other cheek” or jaw when you are attacked? Specifically, what does it mean to be attacked on the “right cheek” or jaw, and why should we turn the other cheek, that is, the *left* one to an attacker?

Well, of course “right” and “left” have their special meanings in the Word, too, as we can see in many lessons and stories. Recall, for example, the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25 where the Lord speaks of the Son of Man coming to separate the nations, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. “And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on His left” (v. 33). Or consider the disciples fishing all night after the Lord’s resurrection and catching nothing. But when the Lord told them to cast their net on the *right* side they caught so many fish they could barely drag them to shore (John 21). Remember, too, how the Lord said that when we do good works we should “not let the left hand know what the right hand is doing” (Matt. 6:3-4).

All these and many other “right-left” references in the Word illustrate the difference between thinking or acting from good and thinking or acting from truth. Even today we talk about right-brained people and left-brained people, meaning the difference between those of us who are more inclined to spontaneous action, or who love art, music and drama, versus those who are more inclined to thoughtful reflection and analysis. But the basic distinction is between good-

ness and truth. The sheep, for example, in the prophecy of judgment, represent those who do the will of their heavenly Father, whereas the goats represent those who just leap from one idea to another, butting heads, perhaps, loving nothing more than a good argument. Fishing on the *right* side as opposed to the left represents seeking knowledge (the fish) from a love for what is good, not just a love of knowledge for its own sake. And the teaching about not letting the left hand know what the right hand is doing reminds us that our good works should not be limited or constrained by our thinking, lest we talk ourselves out of simply doing some good. “On the other hand,” as we say, good and truth must work together to accomplish anything truly useful, and so we often use both hands on the tools that aid our work. In that case the left supports the right, but does not dominate. The right in Scripture is the dominant hand.

Anyway, back to the right cheek or jawbone. If someone slaps you on the right cheek, what does that mean? Well, think about it. What is “a slap in the face,” anyway? We use the expression often, don’t we? It’s an insult! It’s a word or action that “flies in the face” of what you stand for, or what you’re trying to accomplish. Specifically, in Scripture if the slap is on the *right* cheek it represents an insult to a person’s good intentions. So then, if you experience this, what can you do – what *should* you do – about it?

The Lord says, “Turn the other cheek.” OK, that’s the left cheek, right? And the left side of anything corresponds to the thoughtful, analytical side. So there it is. We need to stay calm, be careful and thoughtful, resist an immediate, knee-jerk reaction, and try to understand what’s going on. We need to apply ourselves to the reflective process of analyzing the whole situation, including whatever – if anything – in ourselves might have provoked the action, and patiently respond with sincere good will.

The point is not to defend *ourselves* at all costs, but to defend what is good, what is true and what is useful from the Lord – or rather, in reality, to let the Lord Himself defend it as we turn to HIM for guidance rather than lashing out in kind. And that guidance comes when we apply ourselves to a real understanding of His many teachings about how to love the neighbor.

Notice that the verses in Matthew 5 do *not* say we should not resist evil. You who are older may recall that this *is* how the old King James translation had it. But the meaning really is an evil person, so the New King James we use today has it right. Of *course* we must resist evil. To resist is to stand against. And the Lord is clear that we are not to stand against any human being, rather we are to love *every one*, each one differently according to the good that is in him and in such a way as to promote his good. But we *are* to stand against evil – in ourselves and others.

In fact we are told in no uncertain terms that we must shun evils as sins against the Lord, that is, flee far away from them (Charity 1). If we don’t we will never be able to do any real good because whatever we do will be contaminated from within by those very evils we have neglected to address. Think, for example, about your natural inclination to retaliate when someone “slaps you in the face.” Of course the insult hurts, especially if it’s an insult to your intentions, but notice how an angry, emotional response just makes it worse. On the other hand (let’s say the left hand), notice how a patient, sympathetic, carefully thought out response can at least open doors to a mutual understanding and maybe even co-operation. In international affairs we call this diplomacy, and as long as it doesn’t compromise on principles it works! In fact it works because it is a law of the Lord’s Divine Providence in all human relations.

Further on in our lesson from Matthew the Lord talks about clothing in a similar vein: “If anyone wants to sue you (that is, to have you judged) and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also.” And He adds, “whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away” (vv. 40-42). The tunic in Bible times was an inner garment, representing an internal understanding of the truth. Now if someone wants to judge or condemn that in you, what can you do? How can you “prove” or demonstrate the value of your understanding? Surely not by judging in return, but by “letting him have your cloak also.” The cloak is the outer garment, representing the external, practical facts of the matter. Don’t get excited. Don’t be judgmental in response. Just review the facts.

One mile is one way of proceeding; two miles are two ways joined together. One is a single thing, two is a combination. In Jewish law (Deut. 19:15), affirmed by the Lord in Matthew 18, no one could be convicted on the testimony of only one witness, but rather by “two or three witnesses.” One witness represents one truth, one fact; two or three represent several corroborating truths, or more precisely, truth conjoined with good, as in a marriage, and expressed in useful work. The Lord said, “where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (Matt. 18:20).

So what if someone “compels you to go a mile”? What does that mean? Is he quizzing you? – demanding an answer to some challenging question? Is he trying to lead you astray? – to take you a mile down some path of wrong thinking? What can you do? “Go with him two.” Add to the truth what is *good* so that it is not just an argument but a conversation leading to some use.

And what about if someone wants to borrow from you? To borrow, spiritually, is to be instructed. Note, the person giving the instruction doesn’t lose anything; he retains it all. But he at the same time shares it with someone else who gets the advantage of it. So if someone asks you for information, say about the teachings of the New Church, what can you do? Refer him to a minister? – give him a pamphlet? The Lord says, “Do not turn away.” Give to that person as much as you can from your own understanding. Work with him. Don’t leave him hanging; he may never come back. Plus, when you share with affection you make a much more lasting and meaningful impression than you can with information alone.

In concluding this whole series the Lord said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, 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...” (Matt 5:43-44). The fact is, we have no right to abuse or take advantage of anybody, no matter how they may abuse or threaten us. We can *defend* ourselves, indeed we *must* resist evil, but not the evil person. And when we *are* abused, the teaching is that we must turn the other cheek – not passively inviting more abuse but analyzing, explaining and discussing the problem we are facing with the person – so that we can come to an understanding and be at peace.

“Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12).

Amen.

Lessons: *Leviticus* 24:15-23; *Matthew* 5:38-48; *Arcana Caelestia* 8223: selections
Children’s talk on the law of retaliation: what you do is done to you!