

JESUS! YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS!

Matthew 5:38-41

In last week's message, "*What Are We To Do With Jesus?*" I suggested that many, if not most, Christians prefer to believe theological concepts **about** Jesus more than they do believing **in** Jesus; for believing **in** Jesus leads to **following** Jesus. And I am convinced that most Christians really do not want to follow Jesus, and I think that today's text is some of the proof as to why—so let's read it. (READ TEXT)

I really like Barbara Brown Taylor's confession regarding following Jesus. I just wish we could all be so honest. She writes, "...*I become fully human by imitating Christ, although I will be the first to admit that I want to stop about a day short of following him all the way.*"¹ And friends, I do not believe it is the fear of the cross that causes Brown to want to stop a day short but rather it is Jesus' hard, even demanding, teachings; such as we have before us today.

"*You have heard that it was said...But now I say unto you.*" What powerful words! Jesus is speaking with authority. He is challenging what has been accepted religious teaching and practice. I personally believe that one of the greatest hindrances to spiritual/religious growth is found in a statement like—that is what I was taught and I have just always believed it!

Jesus says, "*You were taught an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth but I have a new teaching for you!*" Now friends, we can profess to be followers of Christ all we want but I guarantee you that we prefer, and that we live, not by Jesus' teachings but by the old teaching, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth—hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe, disfigurement for disfigurement.²

Interestingly, this old law was progressive for its time because it guaranteed the injured person legal justice while also protecting the offender from undue penalty. The old law set a limit on retaliation. It protected the offender from the, you steal from me and I will kill you kind of justice. Yet according to Jesus the eye for the eye mentality does not go far enough in protecting the offending person—in protecting the wrong doer. But wait, is it the one doing wrong that Jesus is trying to protect or is there another message in this hard teaching of Jesus?

Jesus says, "*Do not resist an evil doer.*" It is the legal system that Jesus is referring to. He is saying, "*Do not seek legal vindication against an offending person.*" Jesus prohibits legal retaliation.

Now further Jesus says, "*If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.*" The right cheek! Friends, in order to be struck on the right cheek it requires a backhanded slap. In Jesus' day this was significant. A backhanded slap was degrading, it was an insult more than a physical attack. When Jesus instructs his followers to turn the other cheek if struck on the right one, he is saying, do not return insult for insult. In fact, when Luke records these same words he includes Jesus as also saying, "*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*"³ Instead of reacting with insult when insulted, determine how you would prefer the other person to respond to you and then do accordingly. Now let's be

honest, do we follow, or even like, Jesus' teaching of turning the other cheek? Do we seek legal retaliation? Do we return insult for insult?

What in the world is Jesus thinking when he instructs his followers with such liberal, non-violent, non-retaliatory teachings? So I ask again, do we really want to **follow** Jesus, believing **in** him, or do we just want to believe the comfortable theological teachings **about** Jesus—his virgin birth, his divinity, his resurrection?

Jesus says, "...if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat give them your shirt as well..." In Jewish law⁴ it was forbidden to even hold a person's shirt as collateral for a loan. As today one's residence is protected in a law suit so it was then with one's shirt. But Jesus says to freely give up your shirt even though the law says you do not have to. What? I am sued for all I have and I should freely give my home as well! Is Jesus crazy? If he is not, why then do we prefer believing sweet comfortable theological teachings **about** Jesus more than we do believing **in** Jesus and **following** his teachings?

Jesus says, "...and if anyone forces (commandeers) you to go one mile, go also the second mile." It was customary for Roman soldiers to use Jewish civilians for their own purposes—to commandeer them. It was legally binding for a Jew to carry a Roman soldier's supplies for one mile. Jesus tells his follows to go beyond what the law requires and to voluntarily carry the supplies for a second mile. Voluntarily! Jesus is saying not to lean on the law as an out, or to use the law to claim rights. Is there any wonder why we prefer teachings **about** Jesus over believing **in** Jesus? Is it any wonder that we want to stop about a day short of following Jesus all the way?

Friends, I believe that Jesus is suggesting that there is something more important than retaliation, revenge and legal justice. Instead of these things, Jesus promotes, encourages, and even demands from his followers that **relationship** and **reconciliation** are superior. Jesus does not embrace the concept of justice for justice sake. If we are honest we know that often times a call for justice is a subtle call for revenge, for retaliation. Jesus subscribes to the thought that because wrong has been done to one, does not give that one license to do wrong in return. Or as my father use to say, "*Two wrongs do not make a right.*"

Remember my friends, that Jesus lived what he demanded of those who follow him. When Jesus was being arrested on trumped up charges, and one of his followers came to his defense and cut off the ear of a soldier, what did Jesus do but bring healing to the soldier by restoring his ear. When Jesus stood before Herod and Pilate, those who had the power to order his execution, he put up no defense. When the soldiers were beating Jesus with a whip and verbally insulting him, Jesus said not a word. And then finally, when Jesus hung naked on the cross he prayed to God saying, "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what it is that they are doing.*"

"*You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say unto you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.*" Thus says the one whom Christians claim to follow.

Jesus believed in reconciliation and restored relationships; in which other people's interests are foremost. Now think about it. If we all practice what Jesus teaches then all of

our interests will be foremost. Jesus is not trying to protect the interests of those who do wrong to others rather he is trying to keep his followers from also doing wrong, from being filled with a spirit of vengeance and retaliation.

To follow Jesus' teachings accomplishes far more for the one who has been wronged than for the one who does wrong. For turning the other cheek, going the second mile, and refusing to seek legal justice keeps our hearts from becoming guarded and hardened. Yes, these are some hard teachings. And yes, Jesus wants us to take his teachings seriously. Friends, my prayer is that the time is coming when we who call ourselves Christians will no longer stop a day short of following Jesus all the way.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church*.

² Exodus 21:23b-25 and Leviticus 24:19-20

³ Luke 6:31

⁴ Exodus 22:26-27