

The Ethical Teachings of St. Matthew, V. 38-41.

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THE passage is confessedly difficult. The majority of Christians, if pressed, would find themselves unable to reconcile its teaching, as they understand it, with the dictates of common sense.

The verses appear to inculcate the doctrine of non-resistance, or, at least, of non-resistance by physical force. To say that in the present evil world this would be an impracticable policy is no sufficient answer. "Impracticability" is an ambiguous word. We judge non-resistance to be "impracticable" in the sense that it would be incompatible with the preservation of the present social order. But we cannot truly say that non-resistance would be "impracticable" in the sense that we could not practice it if we chose. It is for the Master to command, for us to obey. At the worst we should only become martyrs to His cause; and nothing is more certain than that the calculations of worldly wisdom have often been falsified by "the foolishness of God."

Accordingly we must regard with an *a priori* suspicion every interpretation which betrays an effort to mediate between the claims of a so-called "literal" meaning and the supposed interests of society. The saying either is or is not a rule for the practical guidance of Christians. If it is so, motives of prudence must not be allowed to stand in the way of our full and frank acceptance of the resulting obligation.

It has indeed been urged that, since our Lord is addressing Christian disciples in their private capacity, or as members of His Church, the State is exempt from the prohibition. The limitation is, however, arbitrary; it is not required or even suggested by a sound exegesis. Moreover, like most attempts at compromise, it is a failure; it does not achieve its object. A rule of private non-resistance would hardly commend itself as less absurd than a rule of non-resistance by the State.

If the saying is intended as a general command, we have no right to restrict the sphere of our obedience. To admit that Christ's rule cannot be kept without exceptions is to annul its Divine authority. Though the rule be Christ's, yet, if the occasions for keeping or relaxing it are to be settled by fallible men, the duty of observance in any given case depends on authority not Divine, but human. We may be told that the exceptions will be made agreeably to other teachings of our Lord. But the very plea is an indirect assertion that He has given us inconsistent orders, and in this event the supreme authority of all His commandments, including the alleged ordinance to refrain from the use of force, is utterly destroyed.

In reality, compromise is impossible. Taken as a rule for our behaviour, the verses cannot be reconciled with the accepted code of morals. They actually oppose it. They do not merely advocate non-resistance ; they put a premium on crime. " Resist not him that is evil. On the contrary, do not stop there. If a ruffian on a lonely road takes your purse, point out to him that he has forgotten your watch and chain."

The truth is that the saying was never intended for a direct rule of conduct. The Sermon on the Mount cuts deeper ; it goes down to principles, and to principles of universal application. Our Lord desired to expound a new and nobler kind of righteousness than that of the official Jewish teachers. The religion of the day made righteousness depend on a literal observance of Old Testament laws and glosses thereon. That He should have met the error by enacting fresh rules, as external and mechanical, as liable to misinterpretation and abuse, as those which they were to replace, is inconceivable. He worked in another way. The Jews had been as children ; Christ's followers were to put away childish things. Children live by rule, grown men by principle ; so He replaced precept by principle, the letter by the spirit ; righteousness of life was henceforth to be sought, not in blind obedience to a system of minute regulations, but in the cultivation of a righteous character. The Sermon on the Mount is the proclamation of this " new

commandment," and every maxim and injunction it contains must only be interpreted in due subordination to the main drift of the whole discourse.

The section, v. 17-48, more particularly concerns us. Our Lord had come to fulfil the law—a law in itself partial and imperfect, but fitted to educate the Israelites for higher things. He wished His disciples to live by the principles which underlay it, that they might thus achieve the purposes for which it had been revealed. He chose as illustrations of His meaning the laws of murder, of adultery and divorce, of perjury, of retaliation, and of neighbourly love, with its obverse. In each of these cases His teaching brought out the principle on which the enactment had been based. Murder had been prohibited to restrain anger; adultery to restrain lust; perjury to restrain falsehood; the right of vengeance had been restricted to retaliation in kind, that the thirst for it might be kept within bounds; the command to love one's neighbour had paved the way to universal love. These principles were now to become the golden rule of the disciples' lives. All those underlying tempers which had led to the need for law—anger, lust, the double standard of truth which produces falsehood, vengefulness, the narrow and selfish spirit which hinders the full development of love—were to be eradicated from the heart. The concrete examples our Lord gives of this "new temper" in operation are employed as illustrations of *the inward spirit* which should actuate Christians. We may be righteously wrath, but we must not cherish personal resentment. We may make solemn oaths, since oaths are necessary where falsehood is rife; but we must have in our minds no shadow of untruthfulness, such as would require an oath to insure the accuracy of our assertions; the Christian's word should be as good as his bond. The objection that in the matter of divorce the Church has received and acted upon our Lord's words as a binding rule is without weight. His statement was primarily made, not as a rule, but to declare the principle at the root of the old law of marriage and divorce. God intended that the marriage tie should be indissoluble; if the

ancient code had granted the husband a regulative permission to divorce his wife, the very legislation pointed forward to an absolute principle ; in Christ's view the wife might only be put away where the bond was in its essence already non-existent.

It is true that our Lord's method of teaching was liable to misapprehension. His figures of speech might readily be mistaken by unimaginative hearers for literal directions. He was, indeed, by no means careful to guard against temporary misunderstanding, and because His doctrine was spiritual, it was peculiarly liable to thoughtless or wilful perversion. Speaking the deepest truths to a mixed audience, He used the only method which could both arrest their attention and, in the end, carry home the lesson. We may well believe that some, perhaps all, of His hearers accepted, at the moment, His metaphorical language in a literal sense. Such was His frequent experience even at a later period and with His most intimate companions. But in days to come they would attain a deeper knowledge, and would finally obtain a more thorough grasp of His meaning than if He had used words simpler to understand but less suited to promote inquiry. And if, when He had left the earth, literalists and fanatics should pervert His lessons, His disciples, themselves guided by the Spirit of truth, could correct their extravagancies and point out the fallacies of their reasoning. Our Lord's justification is, in fact, the prevalent Christian opinion on the matters to which He refers. In the case of warfare, for instance, Christian common sense has relegated obedience to the letter of St. Matthew vi. 38, 39 to the weaker brethren—abnormal or over-scrupulous individuals and sects. A sound moral instinct has led the Church to conclusions which accord with the true lessons of the passage.

The enunciation of the law of retaliation under Divine sanction had included several high moral purposes. One of its objects was to inculcate mildness and humanity.

1. Strict limitations were placed on the right of private vengeance. The amount and kind of retribution which might

be claimed were carefully defined, and, in some cases certainly, the law contemplated that there should be a trial and judicial decision.

2. The law of retaliation is said to have been more clement and equitable in its details than the similar laws of other countries. (This, however, is not an essential point, for, whether improved or not, it was *approved* by God as a temporary measure.)

3. Its very anomalies were calculated to bring about a further advance. As a matter of fact, the later Jews themselves relaxed its pressure. For example, they argued that since commutation of the death sentence was expressly forbidden, money payments might, without a breach of the law, be accepted in satisfaction of minor offences.

Our Lord expands the law in this connection, carrying the work of the Old Dispensation to its logical end. His disciples, far from nourishing revenge, must put away the very desire for it. The sin of resentment must be unknown among them.

In verses 39*b*-41, our Lord adds to the injunction of verse 39*a*. (Verse 42, though connected in thought with the preceding verses, is yet not strictly parallel with the three other supposititious cases.) Refusing to imitate his enemies, the Christian must counter force with love, oppressive exaction with self-sacrifice. He is to "overcome evil with good." Throughout, his duty is represented as it would be in practice if determined by no other consideration than the promptings of forgiving affection. The action portrayed is neither more nor less than the result of the inward desire put into effect without let or hindrance. Christ is depicting ideal conduct, if by that phrase is meant not the best conduct conceivable, but conduct which exactly corresponds to the idea which moulds it; and it would also be in every instance the best conceivable conduct if men could live, as it were, *in vacuo*, with no other duty than to follow the immediate inclinations of a generous heart, heedless of ulterior consequences.

The order of the verses confirms this interpretation. To treat them as literal directions would involve an anticlimax;

most men would find it less troublesome, so far as their worldly convenience was concerned, to give a litigious neighbour double the trifle he claimed than to endure a blow without retaliating, and simpler still to go two miles with an official instead of the one he had demanded. But, taken as we take them, they lead to a climax. It is often much harder to retain a Christian *spirit* in the face of some petty annoyance than under great provocation; the man who will show a forgiving temper with respect to some outrageous wrong or insult will have a far more severe struggle to keep from resentment towards the grasping fellow who is always wanting to "have the law of him," and will perhaps be furiously angry if he considers his assessment for income tax unduly high.

As has been already noticed, verses 39b-41 do much more than form a commentary on verse 39a. While that saying, taken alone, would prescribe an attitude of mere acquiescence, the passage as a whole commands an active duty. The offender is not only to have what he wishes, but to be put in the way of getting as much again.

This fact leads us away from the letter to the deeper meaning. Before us lies a new law of retaliation. The old law, enforced in the circumstances supposed, would compel the aggressor himself to be smitten on the cheek, to have his own coat taken from him, or himself to be impressed for a mile. The new law makes the punishment *vicarious*; the victim not only endures the wrong, but also bears the punishment due to the culprit. The shadow of the Cross lies athwart the passage, and our Saviour's death is the only fitting commentary. His enemies compassed His death, and thereby, according to the principles of their own jurisprudence, themselves incurred the death penalty. But, from another point of view, His death was voluntary. He gave His life that the sin of the world which crucified Him might be done away and the penalty remitted. And every Christian must take up the cross and follow in His steps.

The old law of retaliation was at once the faint reflection and the perpetual reminder of that more awful law of retribution which decrees that sooner or later every sin shall find us out and work its own punishment. But another mysterious law exists whereby Christ could suffer for men's sins, partly abolishing and partly transforming their consequences. And this law, as we dimly see, applies to us also. If the wicked are to be won from sin and the sorrows which march in its train, the victory must be mainly due to the toil and suffering, on their behalf, of Christ's disciples. The spirit of revenge once destroyed within us, we can indeed help our enemies. Not necessarily by letting them have their way; this would be a mere incitement to further wickedness; punishment itself is often the truest sign of a forgiving temper. No, not thus, but by the harder, more wearisome task of winning them back to goodness. The disciple is permitted to share with his Master vicarious suffering for others' sin.

The old law of retaliation is based on Nature, and is inherent in the constitution of the world. "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth," is the inexorable ordinance of Providence for the government of man. When God promulgated it to His chosen people, He was thereby asserting the principle that man, the free moral agent, should co-operate with Himself in carrying out His purposes.

The new law of retaliation is based on grace, and is inherent in the constitution of Christ's Church. "Self-sacrifice for others" is a golden clause in the charter of the new dispensation. Christ offered Himself for our sake upon the Cross. It is not merely our duty, but our glorious privilege, to bear His Cross and drink His cup. It is in the very spirit of the Sermon on the Mount that St. Paul has written for the Galatians and for us, "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ."

