

## Non-resistance

*Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.*

*Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;*

Matthew 5:38-39, 43-44

Jesus' teachings on non-resistance are perhaps among His most divisive and controversial. They seem to fly against our natural instincts as well as common sense—did He really intend that we shouldn't defend against those that would harm us, or worse, harm our loved ones? Are we really supposed to love those who are doing us evil?

### **The radical nature of the Gospel**

In many ways, Christ's Gospel is a radical departure from conventional standards of morality. His teachings on marriage, money, honesty, sexual purity, anger and almsgiving—to list but a few examples from the Sermon on the Mount—are all at odds with societal norms and our own natural instincts. Christ underscores this vast difference between His way and the world's way with sayings such as “If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26), and “He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.” (John 12:25)

The Gospel and its teaching on non-resistance are foreign to the natural man because they are rooted in how God sees this world. The reason we should love our enemies is because God does (Matt. 5:45); the reason we shouldn't resist evil is because God is the ultimate arbiter and judge (I Peter 2:21-23). Only one who has completely accepted God's view of himself and the world around him can fully embrace Jesus' teaching on non-resistance.

### **A different kind of Kingdom**

Christ came to inaugurate a new, heavenly, kingdom. Repeatedly throughout His parables and teachings, Christ expounded on the nature of this kingdom, its citizens and its values (over 120 “kingdom” references in the gospels alone). Those that believe on Christ and follow His way become citizens of this kingdom—a kingdom which has very real claims on its citizens!

What happens when kingdoms are in conflict? If the USA and Canada were to go to war tomorrow, those with dual citizenship would have to quickly decide where their allegiance lies. It is the same with Christ's spiritual kingdom: non-resistance is a key point of conflict, and we must decide where our allegiance lies. If our King did not resist evil but rather gave Himself in love, shouldn't we His subjects follow His example?

When Christ told Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight...,” He was indicating that the nature of the conflict and the weapons of our warfare are not physical, but spiritual. In the final analysis, we Christians are

really only pilgrims and strangers on this earth. The moment we pick up physical weapons to fight on behalf of a “Christian” nation, we are joining the side of the kingdoms of this world and leaving the side of Christ, who is the stone made without hands that will one day smash the kingdoms of this earth (Daniel 2:30-45).

### **What about Romans 13?**

Apostle Paul’s teaching on civil authority in Romans 13:1-7 is frequently cited in support of Christians going to war. (“Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.”) But does Romans 13 teach unconditional obedience to the government in all things?

Plainly, the government’s authority does not supersede God’s. What would we do if the government commanded us to worship idols? It’s clear that doing such a thing would mean denying Christ. In the same way, killing another person, even with government sanction during wartime, is a denial of the validity and power of Christ’s gospel. Rather than the sword, we should be bringing the gospel to our enemies, as ambassadors for Christ.

### **What about the Old Testament?**

Another justification often used to support Christians going to war is God’s commands to the nation of Israel to kill and make war. Such thinking, however, misses the fact that there is now a *new* testament, a direct revelation of God’s will in the person of Jesus Christ. God’s dealings with Israel in the Old Testament were with a nation that had definable boundaries, civil law, and a God-instituted civil authority. Christ’s New Testament kingdom has none of these things.

It is worth noting that in his teaching on non-resistance, Jesus did not make any distinctions between state-sponsored & personal actions. In fact, Jesus’ quotation of the Mosaic law, “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth”, is a reference to punishment by the judges & priests (Ex. 21:22-24; Deut. 19:16-21) or by the whole congregation of Israel (Lev. 24:16-23).

### **What happens if my family is threatened?**

Perhaps the toughest objection to answer against the doctrine of non-resistance is a hypothetical, though very valid, one: what would you do if your family was threatened?

First, we must recognize this for what it is—a hypothetical question. None of us knows for certain what the future holds, or how we will react in any given situation. All that we can do in the present is to study God’s word in preparation for what tomorrow will bring, and place our trust in the One who knows the future completely—the same One who has promised that we will not be tempted above that we are able (1 Cor. 10:13).

This question appeals to our strong protective instincts towards our families, but are natural instincts necessarily the correct guide to right actions? What does Christ say about choosing between Him & family? (Matthew 10:34-38) Does protecting our family give us the right to commit sin? Would you sacrifice to idols or violate a woman to protect your family?

It is a great relief to realize that, ultimately, the protection of our families is not a responsibility we have to bear alone. If we are trusting in Jesus, we have already ensured our families have the best possible protection. How much do we trust Him?

### **Historical Perspectives**

Today, only a small minority of Christian churches—mostly those from the Anabaptist tradition—practice the doctrine of non-resistance. Is this just a denominational quirk, akin to the dark clothing and horse buggies of the Amish?

Both the secular historical record and the writings of Early Christian apologists show that for the first three hundred years of its existence, the Church was unequivocally non-resistant, despite great persecution. This began to change rapidly when Constantine came to power in 312 A.D. and adopted Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. In the space of about 20 years, Christians went from being the *persecuted* to being the *persecutors*, as they hunted down and killed heretics using the power of the state. Augustine and other church theologians looked to the Old Testament for justification of the church-state fusion and for Christians going to war, and refused to acknowledge Christ's teachings as a new and higher standard. Augustine actually claimed that Jesus' teachings on non-resistance relate only to inward disposition, not outward action. In other words, we can kill as long as we have love in our hearts!

The 1500's saw the birth of a group called the Anabaptists, often called the "third wing" of the Reformation, who fully embraced Christ's teaching on non-resistance. The Catholic Church and Protestant Reformers both had state backing and the power of the sword, while the Anabaptists could only flee from persecution. And yet, the Anabaptists' numbers grew by leaps and bounds despite the most violent repression by Catholics & Reformers. Which of these groups do you suppose looked the most like Christ?

From its beginnings in the 19<sup>th</sup> century up to 30-40 years ago, our own denomination has a history of upholding the doctrine of non-resistance, and drinking deeply from Christ's cup of suffering as a result. The testimony of our forefathers is one of pain and tears, but also of great joy as they were made conformable to the image of Christ.

## **Conclusions**

How we treat Christ's teaching on non-resistance will be a key indicator of whether we believe His Gospel can be lived today. Some would claim that the Sermon on the Mount is unattainable, given simply for the purpose of highlighting God's grace—a sort of Version II of the Mosaic law, if you will. This could not be further from the truth. Christ fully intended for us to follow His teachings—in fact, they are the blueprints of His Kingdom. It is to God's everlasting glory that we are only able to follow Christ's teachings through the power of His Spirit, and by the daily grace He bestows on hearts submissive to Him.

Christ closes the Sermon on the Mount with a parable in which He equates the keeping and doing of His sayings with building a house upon a solid rock; conversely, not keeping them is associated with destruction. How important do you think it is to follow Christ on the path of non-resistance?

*This article appeared in the "Truth for our Time" column in the "Christian Friendship Messenger", and is prepared by the Apostolic Christian Church (Nazarean) Communications Committee. Comments or questions can be directed to: [ACCNcommunications@gmail.com](mailto:ACCNcommunications@gmail.com)*