

STRIKING BACK

"And behold, one of them which were with Jesus stretched out his hand, and drew his sword, and struck a servant of the high priest's, and smote off his ear. Then said Jesus unto him, Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword." Matthew 26:51-52.

Scarcely anything is more common, or more expected, in relationships between human beings than paying back somebody in kind. When you have been slandered by an enemy, for example, you go after him with all that you have got. No one will think it unusual that you do. In fact, you may be regarded as a weakling if you don't. When the pressure is strong enough, people have been known to pay back even their friends in kind, without inquiring whether the wrong was fancied or real. Let a man work up enough resentment, and friendship can go by the board, just so he may exercise his "right" to give what he got.

There is not anything modern about retaliation. It has an ancient history, and none of it has been good. People have always felt a certain sympathy with the boy who finally let his tormentors have it, or with the man who finally puts an unfair competitor out of business. There is a certain justice, we think, in this process, and therefore it is justified.

We readily have a considerable amount of sympathy for Simon Peter and what he did on that dark night when our Lord was betrayed. He saw the treacherous disciple giving the Lord Jesus a kiss and observed the band of soldiers standing back of Judas Iscariot. He knew what was going to happen. Quickly, he jerked out his sword and struck back, cutting off the ear of one of the servants of the high priest. Peter struck back, and who can blame him?

The Lord Jesus knew better than that. Luke tells the story of what actually happened. "When they which were about him saw what would follow, they said unto him, Lord, shall we smite with the sword? And one of them smote the servant of the high priest, and cut off his right ear. And Jesus answered and said, Suffer ye thus far. And he touched the ear, and healed him. Then Jesus said unto the chief priests, and captains of the temple, and the elders, which were come to him, Be ye come out, as against a thief, with swords and staves?" Luke 22:49-52.

What was the matter with the Lord Jesus? Here is one man who is ready to stand up for Him, and He makes that man feel like a fool. Our Lord knew better than any of us what was right. In that hour of forlorn hope, striking out with a sword might appear to be a deed of human gallantry, but actually it was an admission of defeat which Christ was not prepared or willing to grant His enemies. The way Christ looked at things, striking back at one's enemies with their own weapons is an admission of defeat which no follower of His can grant. To strike back is to concede that Christ is no longer Lord, and that faith in and dependence on Him will not work. If Christ is Lord, striking back is not necessary.

Have you ever felt like striking back when the going got rough? Have you ever bided your time waiting for a moment to get even with somebody? If you have, you have been altogether human. Since you are altogether human, this message of our Lord Jesus is for you.

Many a black sheep in a family got that way because he or she was continually striking back at what he or she considered to be too rigid discipline, or at what was thought to

be favored treatment of brothers and sisters. Many a girl has gone wrong, as we say, through desire to strike back at her parents or at someone else. All too often, an immature husband lives for himself, getting amusement wherever he finds it, because he is rebelling against the restrictions of a marriage for which he was probably unprepared in the first place. He strikes back at his wife, or even at his own family, just as surely as if he were using his fists. It is not unknown that a wife becomes a nagging witch because consciously or unconsciously she planned it that way: she chose a weakling as a husband as a way of lashing out against a domineering father or brother. Now she has her chance to show what she can do, and she makes the most of it.

Most of us do not need any long-standing or deep-seated resentment to bring us to the boiling point before we get ready to strike back. Have you ever been criticised? What was your reaction? I can just about tell you what it was. Let somebody criticise you, and he will get a recital of his own faults that will knock his eyes out. You may never have thought of bringing up his faults until he criticised you. When that happened, the whole catalog came to your mind immediately. The retort was devastating. You were doing what came naturally, acting on an age-old principle: you unmask my sins, and I'll unmask yours.

Actually, this bitter give and take does not make any sense at all. It never solves a single problem. It simply pollutes the atmosphere. When the Lord Jesus healed the ear of Malchus, He was not justifying the actions of the armed guard. Christ never condoned violent words and actions that invited retaliation. On one occasion He mused to Himself, "It is impossible to eliminate every offensive word and action in this world, but woe to that man by whom that offense comes." People who are always ready to criticise had better remember that.

A journalist named Peter Howard was expert in exercising his critical talent on men, society, and government. One day something happened to him. On the day in question, at a luncheon, Peter Howard was once again regaling his neighbor at the table with one of his brilliant diatribes, when this person suddenly interrupted him and said: "You know criticism is not much good by itself. Any fool can do it, and most fools do." Then he went on to say, "I believe the men of the future are those who match their criticisms with cure . . . everybody says the world ought to be different, but only a few know how it can happen."

Christ knew how it could happen. On His way to the cross, which then was only hours away, He was prepared to show how it could happen. At the moment of His deepest extremity, when Peter cut off the ear of the high priest's servant, Christ turned to him and said: "Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword." Then Christ touched the ear of the servant and healed him.

Christ is Lord, and that makes all the difference in the world. He was never so much the Lord as when He was hanging on the cross and there suffering what appeared to be ultimate defeat. As all of us know now, it was not defeat at all; it was the ultimate victory.

By the design of the Father, it was Christ's duty to die -- not for what He had done or had failed to do, but to die for the sins of others. It went against the grain,

so to speak, for He was a man in every sense of the word, but Christ was completely yielded to the will of God and went ahead with complete confidence in His Father.

As those of us who are God's children know, God never leaves those who trust in Him in the lurch. He protects or rescues His own from every evil, including death itself. "As Jesus was raised from the dead by the glory of His Father, even so let all who put their trust in Him live in newness of life." That newness of faith and life and love does not leave any room for striking back. Retaliation is a part of the old way, whereas forgiveness and healing are the new way--the way of faith in Christ and victory in life.

Undeniably, it is the hard way, but it is the only right way. "Everybody says the world ought to be different, but only a few people know how it can happen." Many are called, but the important few are chosen to follow Him and to change the world, to make everything different.

Christ did not condone unjust and unkind criticism. It is not surprising that Christ devoted a part of His Sermon on the Mount to this besetting sin of judging and criticizing others. On this subject He spoke very plainly. What He said about it was not merely a bit of good advice to be heeded, but it was a definite command to be obeyed. His command was in the form of a prohibition. He commanded us to abstain from this sinful habit. He said: "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again." If He had not said anything else, those words should cause the Christian who is guilty of this sin to discontinue the practice. With the true Christian the command of Christ is final.

Criticising others is so easy. It does not require any intelligence, character or Christianity. Laziness causes some to be critical. If any Christian is doing his duty, as he should, he is entirely too busy to be looking for the faults of others. Jealousy is another cause of it. Self-righteousness and hypocrisy are additional causes. Many criticize others because they think that by tearing down other people they thereby build up themselves. No man can build a house by tearing down the house of his neighbor. No man ever gets right with God or becomes a better Christian by confessing the sins of his fellowman. Looking for and talking about the faults in others arrests one's intellectual and spiritual development, and is a sure way of ministering to his own personal wretchedness. A censorious spirit always kills one's usefulness. As you judge, you will be judged. The measure you give will be the measure you get.

Our Lord made it quite clear that no form of retaliation, however crude or subtle, is the answer to the problem. No matter how hard it may be to take, the only right and successful course is the one of forgiveness. People, who stubbornly refuse to forgive or to become reconciled, are only lying in wait, getting ready for the day when they can strike back in kind. This, said Christ, is not the answer to the disrupted relationships which characterize our world, nor will it heal the hurts of the world.

What does striking back get you? What does it get you to elbow back one man on this side and shove back somebody else on the other side? What's the good of slashing someone's throat, either figuratively or literally? The only result is more bitterness, and the development of more ruthless forms of getting even, all with the excuse, "In this dog-eat-dog world, that's the way it has to be."

Is that the way it has to be? Not unless one wants to live on the level with dogs. This dog-eat-dog philosophy is poison, with power to destroy and kill.

This incident of Peter and his sword is related in all four Gospels. It tells us that this is the way Christ was. This is what He did. This is how He acted when He faced the cross. There was not any bitterness in Him, and He did not have any idea of retaliating. Later Peter told his hearers and readers, "When he was reviled, he reviled not again. When he suffered, he threatened not, but committed everything to him who judges righteously. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed." Then Peter said to these people who had endured all kinds of indignities without retaliation: "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as if something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed."

It is said frequently, "He had it coming to him." "Justice had to be administered." "What I did was only fair." All of these things could have been said when Christ was betrayed. Didn't Malchus have it coming to him? Didn't that whole crowd have a lot more coming to them than they got?

If all of us received our just deserts, where would we be? If God dealt with us as we deserved, where would we be? If Christ had died simply as a martyr to a just cause, where would we be? If He had not died for us, where would we be?

God does not expect anyone to be a weakling. He is not pleased when we stand by idly when others are being treated unjustly. He doesn't want us to repress these things until we become nothing but a garbage can of bitterness instead of a channel of forgiveness. God wants His children to be strong enough to resist the urge to retaliation, and strong enough to right the wrong. Wrongs are righted by a courageous rebuke of the wrong-doer and generous forgiveness when he repents of his wrongdoing. This is Christ's way, and it should and must be our way. It will be if we follow Christ.

Many do not understand Christ's way, and do not want to do so. Because He counseled against retaliation, He has often been misunderstood. Our Lord was not a coward. He did not compromise with evil, nor was He ready to adjust to injustice. He stood stalwart and severe in the face of the proud and the powerful. In His heart there was a purpose which could not be shaken. In His being and bearing there was the fortitude of love, which Paul later called "the more excellent way." When the apostles talked about what happened that night before Christ was crucified, they said, "He healed the ear of the slave."

The Holy Spirit had Paul to write, "Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not" (Romans 12:14), and "Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good" (12:21). In spite of these and kindred teachings of God's word, a lot of people, including some who call themselves Christians, prefer the old proverb "Fight fire with fire." They say we should counter force with force, meet spite with spite, hatred with hatred, revenge with revenge, etc. This is the ancient law, and as far as many are concerned, nothing has happened to change it.

It is a kind of code of honor which tells us, "Any man worth his salt will not let another defame his name or injure his person without making him pay for it." That is the way of law, but, thank God, there is a higher and better way for those who will walk in it. Knowing Christ changed Paul from a hateful pursuer and persecutor of innocent people into an apostle of our Lord. Let no one say that something like this cannot happen today. The same thing happens to those who really come to know Christ as their Saviour

Those who do not fight fire with fire are not weak and helpless. They fight fire as firefighters do with water or foam. When a plane is in trouble and has to make a forced and precarious landing, which might be dangerous because of the possibility of fire, firefighters often lay down a whole layer of foam on the runway, so that if the landing gear refuses to operate, the plane comes down on that layer of foam and slides to a stop in a cloud of the foamy stuff which simply smothers any fire that might develop in one of the engines. Foam does not look like much, but it helps to put out the fire. Christ did not look like much to people standing around the cross. Some pitied Him, and others made fun of Him. Today people respect Him, but the best they feel for Him is pity and the worst they offer Him is outright ridicule.

When you are mistreated, and your rights are violated, you are tempted to fight fire with fire. The natural impulse is to seek revenge, to get even. That course appeals to people. They ask themselves, "How else will that so-and-so ever learn his lesson if I don't teach him?" They remark, "I am not going to be a doormat for anybody." Driven by this senseless line of thought and fed by self-pity, anger grows, and soon the fat is in the fire. If people anger you, of course, they have conquered you. You may say, "I am going to fight fire with fire, even if it burns up the whole neighborhood." Fighting fire with fire only spreads the fire. Self-vindication, revenge, and overcoming evil with evil have caused untold havoc in the human family, with effects that last for generations.

Repay no one evil for evil. Don't avenge yourself, but leave that to God, as our Saviour did. The Word of God says, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." When people slight and try to hurt you, don't think of yourself as judge, jury and executioner, and try to come back in exactly the same way. Have respect for God Who is righteous and will take care of those who think they can get by with anything and everything. He frequently takes care of them in devastating ways, and much more effectively than you can ever do. Leave vengeance to God. He will take care of that.

Instead of fighting fire with fire, fight it with water, foam, or whatever will extinguish it. Hate tears down, but it takes love to build. Violence can hurt, but it takes faith and love to heal. Life is too short to be little. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is able to absorb and overcome every evil word and act. Trust in Him and find release from the old grind of retaliation. Have the spirit of Christ and put up your dagger. If you don't, you will inflict upon yourself a greater injury than you can ever inflict upon another. If you are not a Christian, receive Christ as your Saviour now and be saved. Then love and serve Him until the end of life.