

## 8. *Disarmament*

I say to you: Do not resist the evil one. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

Matthew 5:38-42

### *The peace movement*

In the Sermon on the Mount we hear Jesus speaking about non-violence: "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles." Aggression calls forth aggression. It's self-evident to hit back. Jesus' exhortation to reply to aggression with accommodation and submission is thus very striking: "And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."

This message of suffering and non-violence has a certain popularity in our time. The peace movement has picked it up: don't we have here the means to break through the spiral of the arms' race? The Sermon on the Mount has been brought into position against the bomb. Verse 38 seems to verbalize the attitude which we have to get rid of once and for all: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. The modern balance of power, whose growth man is powerless to control, appears to be based on this principle of retribution: eye for eye, weapon for weapon, rocket for rocket. It appears just as clearly that Jesus rejects the thought of retribution replacing it with the message of non-violence which breaks through the spiral.

Now Jesus has certainly come in the service of a peace movement. The angels did not sing in vain "Peace on earth and good will towards men." The prophets already announced that the Lord God is working towards total disarmament. In chapter 2 Isaiah says that in the days of the Messiah the nations will beat their swords into plowshares. "Nation will not take up the sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore." At the same time the Bible also demonstrates that this goal can only be reached through the coming of God's king and through sub-

mission to His Anointed Son. Men will not make any peace with one another if they have no peace with God; and nations will not be reconciled to one another before they are reconciled to their Creator. For that reason Jesus became man in order to suffer and to die for our sins. The disarmament of the nations demanded the death of the Savior. There is no other way to the kingdom of peace than via Jesus Christ. By faith we will receive world peace from Him when He returns in glory. Plucking texts out of the Sermon on the Mount without bowing before Jesus is unthinkable. Those who don't want to hear about sin and salvation may not write texts from the Sermon on the Mount on their banners. God has his own peace movement on this earth. Marching in it by faith we learn something underway about non-violence from Jesus.

### *Right versus might*

Jesus begins His instruction in verse 38 with a word that was spoken to the forefathers: "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth." They follow the proclamation of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 21:24. Although they sound harsh and unpleasant to our ears, we are nevertheless dealing with mild and fair regulations.

Violence is truly harsh, and violence has a long history in this world: as old as our fall into sin. Cain started with his bare fists and beat his brother to death. Lamech, one of his posterity, composed songs to violence and glorified it like an early "Hell's Angel:" "I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me." No wonder then that his son, Tubal Cain, discovered the craft of smithing: the science of weaponry supports the man intent upon asserting himself.

Over and against the irrational violence of revenge and enmity God has taught man about right. Retribution must not be blind, or in rage, but rather fair and controlled. Justice means punishing every offense according to its seriousness. Killing a young man for one punch is not just: at the most the boy should have been punished with a similar slap. Self-controlled and impartial judges are needed to apply the rule of eye for eye. If fact, the whole concept of legal liability in modern times is nothing else than the application of the fair rule: eye for eye, compensation for damage suffered.

The people of Israel were held back from imperialism by the law of "eye for eye" while their kings were known as mild rulers.

Christian ethics have developed guidelines for a just war and one of them is keeping everything in proportion. Minor provocations do not justify major retaliation and total war (which is waged blindly) is in and of itself un-Christian.

Having penetrated into the human world through sin, violence is being pushed back by *right*, which God teaches man, and the law of fair retribution remains in force under Jesus' reign too. Indeed, the last judgment will employ it as the standard measurement: everyone will be judged according to his works and not arbitrarily punished. God will not destroy the world in rage but He will act as a righteous Judge. The Lord has shown how much this right is worth to Him by placing the priceless blood of His own, beloved Son over and against the unpayable guilt of man. The "eye for eye" rule brought Jesus instead of us to Golgotha, the place which God had forsaken. This manner of righteous retribution truly demonstrates that with God, right does not drive out mercy!

In modern discussions the balance of power is defended with the eye for eye rule. But the equation of the rule "eye for eye," "tooth for tooth" with the modern arms' race is certainly incorrect. Weapons developed to function as instruments of *total* destruction clearly violate the careful rule of eye for eye. The struggle of *right* against violence, even totalitarian violence, *degenerates* into a balance of terror when the limits of fairness and self-controlled response are exchanged for the intemperance of total destruction.

#### *Non-violent faith*

A superficial reading of verse 29 might give the impression that Jesus is ready *to trade in* the rule of right, (which must be brought into position over and against violence) for the rule of non-violence under opposition and oppression. After reminding his audience of "eye for eye" in verse 38, He begins to talk about non-violence in verses 39 to 42. This follows upon the word which the forefathers had already received, the message which He Himself intends to transmit. Still, Jesus does not intend to replace one rule with another. On the contrary, He places no new general rule over and against the general rule of eye for eye. At the beginning of verse 39 He declares that the rule of eye for eye must not be applied in the special case of the struggle against the evil one. The rule has not been abolished, but

it appears to be inapplicable to the struggle against the evil one.

Here some interpreters read *all evil, wicked persons*. This can't be the case. Jesus would have then employed the plural form by speaking about all possible forms of persecution in His examples. The text would have read: "Do not resist evil persons but if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." Something else is written there instead: "Do not resist *the evil one*. If someone strikes you on the right cheek turn to him the other also." At this point we need to think about Satan, the great opponent of God's kingdom of peace. One of the preceding verses (5:37) mentions his name and he resurfaces in the 6th entreaty: "But deliver us from the evil one" (6:13). In his attack against God Satan employs all kinds of people by inciting them against Christians whom he hopes to intimidate and lead away from the faith. Jesus had already spoken about people who "insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me" (5:11). Now that the evil one reappears on stage in 5:39, his instruments show up again in verses 39b to 42.

People may strike believers on the cheek (39b), obtain unjust settlements through lawsuits (40), condemn them to forced labor (verse 41) and demand and confiscate their possessions (42). Nevertheless, all of these pin-pricks delivered by hostile humans can be traced back to the enmity of the evil one against God's kingdom of peace and against all those who believe in it. Christians are not struggling against men, but against Satan. They should not attempt to assert their rights in this struggle now. In this front-line, they have to choose for suffering, non-violence. The requirement for people and nations to stand up for right and to punish violence fairly must remain. But Christ's church does not use this rule of justice in the struggle against the evil one. Here the requirement to suffer and accept persecution counts so that we might inherit the kingdom of heaven through great oppression, (5:10).

Jesus' strategy stands over and against the dormant zealotry of Israel: right up to the present day the Jewish people still have the urge to insure a place for themselves on earth by force. Jesus' marching orders also stand diametrically opposed to the idea of the holy war in Islam. While Israelis fight against Muslims, with a religiously charged fanaticism, the Christian church has had to follow the road of arena's and discrimination and forced

labor. No swords are being forged in secret, only books of martyrs in public.

What is this non-violent faith good for anyway? It proves that the evil one has lost. No general gives his troops the order to lay down their weapons before the battle is decided. But since Jesus says this, it is apparently safe enough to proceed with suffering. He has overcome the evil one. Even the gates of hell cannot overcome His church. The calling of the church in the New Testament period is to demonstrate through non-violent life *how rock-solid* faith in Christ's triumph may be.

Because the church is weak, Jesus receives the honor: He is the one who rescues and preserves her in the battle which the evil one still wages against the church. Disarmament can begin with God's people: a sign of hope for a world which is still scourged by violence and still needs to employ the sword of righteousness.

God's demonstration for peace has started its march and continues, though many people don't feel inclined to join this kind of peace-movement and even throw mud at the believers.

### *Church and armament*

Jesus' words about non-violence do not lead to universal pacifism. They focus on the struggle of believers against the evil one and their behavior under oppression and persecution. They teach the church not only to forgo any counterattack during oppression, but also give her the courage not to depend on the weapons of the world. In her struggle against the evil one the church has no need of a nuclear shield, neither directly nor indirectly. She is not called to seek out suffering but at the same time she may not try to keep it outside the door. Suffering and persecution do not represent failure for the church: she is allowed, if God so wills, to glorify Christ through her suffering. The persecuted church seeks no pity, but rather prayer and participation. The continued survival the non-violent Christian faith demonstrates to the nations of this world who really is sovereign on earth. At the same time it shows that He does not build His kingdom by means of violence, but through faith. That kingdom knows complete disarmament.

Believing in Jesus and waiting for His kingdom means breaking with violence, and being committed to pursuing right. God places us under the equitable rule of "eye for eye." As citizens

Christians will be devoted to the employment of justice as a weapon against violence, national and international. Intercessory prayer for judges is church prayer. Striving for righteousness, in the waging of war and armaments as well, belongs to a Christian's tasks. If Christians are not by definition pacifists, neither do they give their blessing to all weapons and sanctify each war. The reverse applies as well: Christians who suffer rather than fight for their faith can still help their neighbor when it concerns *just wars* against murderers and tyrants. At the same time they know that the struggle of right against might will only be brought to a conclusion in God's kingdom of peace. True believers will go inside while murderers will stay outside forever (Rev 22:15).