

## Matthew 5:38-42

### The Call to Self-Denial

We come to a portion in the Sermon on the Mount today that has in all likelihood contributed more than any other portion in the New Testament toward a wrong notion of the character of Christ. Here is where the counter-culture movement of the 60's and 70's draws their notion that Christ was a type of peaceful protesting pacifist who led His campaign against the war and violence that characterized the status-quo both in politics and religion.

*Do you see what Christ is teaching here? – they ask. When you are threatened or abused or attacked you are not to respond in kind but you are to turn the other cheek. You are to allow yourself to be taken advantage of under any and every circumstance. The Christian that defends himself or defends his home is out of character with his religion. He is certainly not following the teachings of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount.*

The fact that Christ Himself doesn't exactly fit this model of extreme pacifism is a thing of very little consequence to those who follow such a rationale. I suppose they would say that nobody's perfect when they behold Christ on two separate occasions in the gospels turning over the tables of the money changers while He creates a stampede of animals while driving the profit-mongers out of His Father's house. Or perhaps they would say that capitalism in any shape or form is the one thing that can call for righteous indignation.

At any rate – we are forced to admit that what we find in this section of the Sermon on the Mount does strike us as being somewhat strange. *Turning the other cheek – giving away more than what we're sued for – going the extra mile* – what can it all possibly mean? And if you find that these notions seem strange you would do well to keep in mind that this strangeness is in keeping with a consistent pattern that is found throughout this sermon.

We've noted this a number of times in our study of the beatitudes. The world regards it as very strange that one who is poor in spirit should be blessed. And the world regards it very strange that those who mourn will be blessed or that the meek shall inherit the earth. We shouldn't count it strange, therefore, to come across more sayings of Christ that seem to run in the opposite direction to the world's thinking.

It should be emphasized again and again that the true subject of the Kingdom of Heaven is different from the world. His thinking is different – his outlook is different – his interpretation of the circumstances of life is different. His view of God and his view of himself and of sin have all been transformed by the power of the gospel.

What, then, do these verses teach us? How are we to put into practice this matter of turning the other cheek or going the extra mile? To answer this question it's important to keep in mind that in our analysis of this section of Matthew 5 we've been noting how these correctives that the Lord Jesus gives us to the Pharisaical abuses of the law consist in a number of calls.

There is a call to consistency found beginning in v. 21. The Lord calls for consistency between the inward motions of the heart with the outward actions of the body. *Don't flatter yourselves*, Christ says in effect *into thinking that you're rendering obedience to the law of God merely by a form of external compliance*. There must be consistency between the thoughts of the heart and the performance or abstinence from the deed.

We've also noted Christ's call to the subjects of the Kingdom of Heaven for purity and for fidelity. In our last study we noted the call to straightforward honesty in our communication. We could label this call a return to simplicity so that rather than having to have the truth of what we say gauged by some superficial standard of swearing we instead let our communication function in the realm of being straight forward and honest.

In the portion of the Sermon on the Mount that we're considering this morning I think you could label it also by a call. We find in vv. 38-42 what could be labeled a call to self-denial. This is the principle that governs the specifics of these verses. And as Lloyd-Jones points out often in his treatment of this section of the sermon on the mount the principles are the most important aspects of the sermon.

By understanding the principles we'll guard ourselves from becoming too caught up with how the specifics apply. Indeed Lloyd-Jones views many of these specifics as serving the purpose of illustrating the principles. So in the case before us this morning we find the principle of self-denial. And this principle is illustrated 3 different ways.

- There's self-denial with regard to avenging ourselves – this principle is illustrated by the turning of the other cheek.
- And then there's self-denial with regard to our possessions – this is illustrated by the giving away of our cloaks when we are sued for our coats.
- And then there's the principle of self-denial with regard to our service – this is illustrated by the Lord's statement about going the extra mile.

I see all of these illustrations culminating in the statement found in v. 42. Here's the whole matter in a nutshell – *give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away*. In other words the aim in our self denial is to transform us from takers into givers. It's the taker, you see, that is quick to assert his rights and defend himself. It's the taker that will cling to his possessions without any thought as to how temporal all his material possessions are. And it's the taker, rather than the giver, who will endeavor to do the least he can get by with rather than the most that he can possibly do.

Do you see, now, how by understanding the principle behind these illustrations we are brought face to face with something that is not excessive or extreme – the way some would make it by placing too much emphasis on the illustrations while giving too little attention to the principle. By focusing on the principle itself we are able to see with greater clarity how we are to strive for perfection – how our righteousness, practically speaking, will exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

I want to direct your attention, therefore, to what I would label – the call to self-denial. And the question I want to endeavor to answer this morning is simply this:

## How Do We Answer the Call to Self Denial?

### I. By Knowing the Meaning of Such a Call

What are we called to when we're called to turn the other cheek or give our cloak in addition to our coat or go the second mile?

I have already cited the example of Christ Himself in order to dislodge the notion that this call to self-denial amounts to a call to pacifism under any and every circumstance. You may find in the example of the Apostle Paul another instance where Paul didn't simply allow himself to be beaten or flogged without at times asserting his rights.

See him, for example, in Acts 16. He's been beaten and whipped and cast into prison. This treatment wasn't right and in the course of the night God sent an earthquake which shook the foundation of the prison and opened the doors and loosened everyone's bonds. They could have easily escaped and it is in that very instance where you find Paul practicing self-denial. He makes no attempt to escape. Indeed when he perceives that the jail-keeper is about to kill himself he cries with a loud voice in v. 28 *Do thyself no harm: for we are all here.*

You know the story – how the Philippian jailer came in trembling before Paul and Silas. The very fact that he trembled would indicate that he knew that the imprisonment of these men wasn't right. The fact that he trembled indicated that he also knew that God had vindicated these servants of Christ. But in their self-denial they refused to escape and chose instead to lead that jailer and his household to Christ.

The next day the jailer came to Paul to report that the magistrates had decided to let them go. At this point we find Paul deciding that the occasion called for him to assert his rights as a Roman citizen and so we read in v. 37 *But Paul said unto them, They have beaten us openly uncondemned, being Romans, and have cast us into prison; and now do they thrust us out privily? Nay verily; but let them come themselves and fetch us out.*

Here then is a narrative that demonstrates Paul's practice of self-denial and his asserting of his rights. The lesson is plain that there is a time for both. We have another example of Paul deciding to spare himself from a Roman flogging in Acts 22. In that chapter Paul had been attacked by an angry Jewish mob. That mob would have killed him had he not been rescued by the Roman soldiers. Upon receiving permission to address the Jews Paul shares his Damascus road testimony with them in Acts 22. All was going well until Paul made mention of the Gentiles. Upon hearing that he was sent to the Gentiles the Jewish mob erupts again and seeks to kill Paul. The Roman centurion, determined to get to the bottom of the issue, decides that he'll interrogate Paul by binding him and flogging him. Before the process got underway, however, we find Paul asking the centurion *Is it lawful for you to scourge a man that is a Roman, and uncondemned?*

This assertion of his Roman citizenship struck fear in the hearts of those around him and Paul was spared from this interrogation technique. Again – another instance where a servant of Christ didn't merely turn the other cheek, so to speak, but asserted his rights.

These examples serve to demonstrate that this precept of turning the other cheek is not merely a matter of fatalistic pacifism. I believe the kind of self-denial that's called for is the denial of self interests to Christ's interests. His cause would keep Paul and Silas in prison when they could have escaped an unjust imprisonment. The salvation of a soul was deemed to be more important and so Paul and Silas stayed in prison.

You have, perhaps, heard the story of a couple of Moravian missionaries who had a very strong burden to take the gospel to a remote island in which the inhabitants of that island were slaves. There was no communication between those slaves and the rest of civilization around them. And so there was no way that these Moravian missionaries could get to these slaves in order to share the gospel with them. At long last they adopted a course of action in which they sold themselves into slavery in order to be among those slaves. What an example of self-denial for the cause of Christ.

I think you find another notable example in the person of Moses in the Old Testament. Moses has often times amazed me at his practice of self-denial. The people of Israel were so bent on returning to Egypt that they often spoke of stoning Moses so they could appoint themselves a captain who bring them back to slavery. God Himself instructed Moses on a couple of occasions to stand aside in order to allow God to destroy the grumbling ungrateful Israelites. But in an act that would amount to turning the other cheek – Moses would instead fall on his face and plead to God for the Israelites. And the driving force of his intercession was always the honor of God. *What will the heathen think?* – was his plea, if God failed to bring the children of Israel into the promised land? He was not interested in his own cause or vindication – he was interested entirely in God's honor.

And this is what governs the turning of the other cheek. Will it advance Christ's cause? Will it serve to better glorify His name? This was the driving force of the early church. We have the account in Acts 8 of those early Christians being driven from their homes. *Saul made havoc of the church* we're told in Acts 8:3. *They were scattered abroad* we're told in v. 4. But what did they do? Did they attempt to regroup and arm themselves so they could take back what was rightfully theirs? Did they organize a political action committee that would take their cause to Rome in order to appeal to the Emperor for their rights? No – we read, rather, that *they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.*

Here is what self-denial means then. It doesn't mean that we merely surrender to our fate and never do anything. It does mean that we place Christ's interests above our own. It's the cause of His Kingdom that should lead you to deny yourself of anything and everything that will advance the gospel.

Consider with me next that we can answer the call to self-denial more effectively:

## II. By Knowing the Reason for the Call

Remember the theme of the Sermon on the Mount. Christ is preaching about the Kingdom of Heaven. The very nature of that Kingdom is good reason to practice self denial. After all what are we really dealing with in the matter of self denial? To a great degree we're dealing with the differences between this present sin-cursed world and that which is blessed and everlasting in duration.

How important are my rights in the context of a world that will be dissolved by fire and burned with fervent heat? (2Pet 3:12). It is because of the transient nature of this world as well as the defilement of this world that Christ would say – Lk. 14:26 *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.*

Christ is not calling on us to hate those that are nearest and dearest to us – but He's calling on us to view those relationships and even our own lives beyond the setting of this sin-cursed world to a higher setting of the Kingdom of Heaven.

So the very nature of the Kingdom of Heaven gives us good reason for this call to self-denial. My vindication in this world is nothing. My possessions in this world are nothing. My service to this world is nothing – but the vindication of the gospel is everything and gaining a portion in the Kingdom of Heaven is everything and our service toward the Kingdom of Heaven will count for much. This is why we deny ourselves.

There's another good reason why we are called to self-denial – and that is because we are called to go in the opposite direction from the fall of man. What did the fall of man amount to in the garden of Eden? Did it not amount to this – Adam and Eve saying we will assert ourselves. We will have our rights and those rights will be what we deem them to be. We will not deny ourselves in order that God may rule over us but we, instead, will rule over God.

Turning the other cheek – parting with more than we have to part with – going the second mile – these things run so contrary to the nature of fallen man that sinners are repulsed by the notion.

This is why it must be constantly stressed throughout the Sermon on the Mount that we're dealing with matters that are impossible to the natural man. It goes against the natural man's nature to deny himself of anything. He must have his way. He must have his rights. He is fully entitled to do whatever he must in order to have his rights.

Albert Barnes remarks in his commentary that this was the way the precept *an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth* became abused. *This command is found in Ex 21:24 Lev. 24:20 Deut. 19:21. In these places it was given as a rule to regulate the decisions of judges. They were to take eye for eye, and tooth for tooth, and to inflict burning for a burning. As a judicial rule it is not unjust. Christ finds no fault with the rule as applied to magistrates, and does not take upon himself to repeal it. But, instead of confining it to magistrates, the Jews had extended it to private conduct, and made it the rule by which to take revenge.*

*They considered themselves justified, by this rule, to inflict the same injury on others that they had received.*

When you see such a direction, then, in the realm of the world and in the realm of apostate religion then it's no wonder that the true subjects of the Kingdom of Heaven are called to go in a different direction. We find our freedom in our slavery to Christ. We find our joy in submission to Him as our King. Most gladly do we relinquish our claim to anything and everything if only we might have Christ and like Paul be found in Him not having mine own righteousness which is of the law but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God, by faith (Phil. 3:9).

So we answer the call to self-denial by knowing the meaning of the call. We answer the call to self-denial by appreciating the reasons for the call. It remains for us to consider that we answer the call to self-denial:

### III. By Knowing the Requirement for Heeding the Call

Like the other precepts in the sermon on the mount this precept of self-denial is impossible for the natural man to practice. It is foolishness to him to turn the other cheek. It is equally foolish to allow himself to be taken advantage of above what he absolutely must.

Nothing short of a miraculous new birth will suffice to enable the sinner to practice the kind of self-denial that Christ here calls for. And even with the new birth the believer still finds himself having to do battle against an old nature that constantly seeks to assert itself. How then can the believer gain the victory over the flesh that will enable him to heed this call to self-denial?

Certainly his fellowship with Christ will enable him to heed this call. I cited Phil. 3:9 a moment ago and we heard Philippians 3 read earlier in our service. There is a portion in that chapter that shows us how Paul would practice self-denial as well as the extent to which Paul would practice self-denial.

Would you note in Phil. 3:7 the statement that indicates Paul's self-denial – *What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Whatever I gained, Paul says, in effect – whatever stature I achieved – whatever intellectual attainments I managed – however much fortune and prestige became my portion – I would count them all loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ.*

Do you see Paul's self-denial? Can you perceive the extent of his self-denial? Nothing in this world matters, he is saying. I will gladly bear the loss of anything and everything this world can afford if I may but have Christ. The desire and pursuit of Christ, then, is what will enable us to heed this call. If you gain the excellency of the knowledge of Christ then in your own mind you will not really be sacrificing anything. The sacrifice is nothing in comparison to what you gain when you gain the knowledge of Christ.

I remember a young man I knew some time ago who went down to Bob Jones University to pursue his studies. It seems that this young man had given up a lot of scholarships and grants that could have made going to college much easier from a financial point of view. And for all his financial sacrifices he still managed to get himself kicked out of school. I remember being down in Greenville when this young man got kicked out and so I went to talk to the Dean of men just to see if I could draw anything whereby I could encourage this young man or his parents.

In my time with the Dean of men I asked him if he was aware that this young man had sacrificed a lot of financial support in order to come to BJU. The Dean informed me that everybody knew how much this young man thought he had sacrificed. This young man made it a point to brag about his sacrifice on any and every occasion. And then the Dean asked me the question – is what this young man did really a sacrifice for Christ? Do those who truly know and love Christ profess that they ever could really sacrifice anything for Him?

Only those that don't know Him and that place too much value on the temporal things of this passing world could ever harbor the notion that they're denying much for Christ. To those that know Him and that strive to know Him more this call to self-denial will seem as nothing.

We could tie this principle of self-denial to the very last beatitude that we studied in vv. 10 & 11. I take these two verses to be one beatitude when we read *Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.*

The emphasis throughout the beatitudes and especially the emphasis on this last beatitude by the double pronouncement of Christ is that the people of God are blessed. To the degree that we know that and appreciate that – to that same degree we'll find it easy to turn the other cheek. We'll find it easy to part with the material goods of this world and we'll find it easy to go the extra mile.

The requirement for heeding this call, therefore, is the requirement of the knowledge of Christ. To the degree we know Him – to that same degree we'll know that we're blessed and to the degree that we know we're blessed – to that same degree we'll find the enabling power to heed our Savior's call to self-denial.

I wonder this morning – do you find it hard to deny yourself? Do you find yourself easily provoked when it comes to your rights and your possessions and how others treat you? I'm afraid the problem of finding self-denial difficult is symptomatic of a greater and a deeper spiritual problem. Maybe you don't know Christ – or maybe you don't know Him as intimately as you should. May the Lord help us to seek the remedy to such a problem by seeking to know Christ so well that we like Paul will find it easy to count all things but loss if we may but gain more of Him.