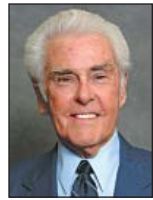


Distinct in my reaction

As Jesus and his disciples strolled along the streets of Jerusalem, they observed ways that the Jews in the Roman-dominated city were violating laws expressed in the Torah. In this series of lessons we have considered Jesus' response to major violations dealing with murder, adultery and divorce. As you remember, Jesus criticized attitudes in his responses to these issues in order to create a change in attitudes for each of them.



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These major problems were existent but not as common for the average Jews as the two issues we consider today: oaths and retaliation. It was not difficult for our Lord and his disciples to hear these issues discussed among the common Jews of their day.

But these issues are not limited to Jews in Jerusalem — they are common issues in contemporary America. We must give consideration to their meaning for our lives as well.

Concerning honesty in relationships (Matthew 5:33-37). Once again Jesus said, “You have heard” what was said in the Old Testament law, “you shall not swear falsely by my name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the Lord” (Leviticus 18:12) and “you shall be careful to perform what goes out from your lips” (Deuteronomy 23:33).

In spite of the teachings of the law (or as a way to avoid them), the scribes had a great deal to say about which oaths were binding and which were not. “They made an oath binding or not depending on its wording. To swear by the gold on the altar was considered binding, but to swear by the altar itself was said not to be binding.” If God’s name could somehow be related to the object of the oath, it was binding (Frank Stagg, “Matthew,” Broadman Bible Commentary, p. 111).

A statement by Plutarch, a renowned Greek philosopher and biographer of the same era of Jesus and his disciples, indicates that lying in an oath was also done by the Greeks. “He who cheats with an oath acknowledges that he is afraid of his enemy, but he thinks little of God” (Lysanther, ch. 8).

But Jesus broke through the fiction of lying when he declared, “Do not swear at all.... Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’” Jesus was condemning what theologians call casuistry, “the dishonesty that tries to hide behind clever wording of an oath” (Stagg, p. 111.). This is not a condemnation of all oath taking such as used in civil and court situations. He is calling for such honesty by persons that oaths will not add anything of worth to their statements.

Concerning the law of retaliation (Matthew 5:38-42). When the law specified “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” (Exodus 22:23), it was in order to restrain excessive retaliation rather than to encourage it. Stagg recommends a different reading of Matthew 5:29: “not to resist with evil” may be a better translation than do not resist one who is evil. Jesus resisted evil and that is the Christian’s business” (p. 111).

Stagg would also apply the principle of “turning the other cheek” in terms of “self-exposure to the insults, misunderstandings, resentment, or other harm as one tries to relate redemptively or constructively to others” since few Christians today ever endure a blow on the cheek. A more drastic attack on Christians is apt to include actual physical harm, which could result in death, but this is not what Jesus is discussing.

By Jewish law a person could sue for the long undergarment (coat) but not for the cloak, an outer garment used by the poor as a cover for the night. An illustration of a Jew being

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Scripture: Matthew 5:33-42

forced to carry a soldier’s burden is found in forcing Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross of Jesus one Roman mile on the way to the cross (Matthew 27:32).

In each of these situations, Jesus encouraged voluntary compliance with the demand rather than expressing bitter acceptance. But one may protest that many do not deserve such generous treatment. Stagg points out that “merit is not the basis for decision.” Being able to help is the Christian concern (p. 111).

Episcopal Community Services in Kansas City has applied that principle in providing hot meals five days a week for the homeless at 22 food programs throughout the Kansas City area (“[Old KC soup kitchen now serves restaurant-style](#),” Kansas City Star, Feb. 6, 2014).

It is different from the typical stand in line, grasp a tray, sit down and eat. When Brian Oglesby entered the door there was no line and he was met by a “greeter” who showed him to a table. A volunteer waitress took his order. She soon appeared with a glass plate of poached fish, golden rice, sautéed carrots and fresh fruit. “It’s different,” he said later. “They are treating me good like they don’t know that I’m homeless.” The idea is to treat clients with the respect of a paying customer.

“Jesus is here talking to disciples, and speaking of personal relations: he is not laying down moral directions for states and nations (A. M. Hunter, *A Pattern for Life*, p. 54). But the principles of honesty in those relationships and treating persons in need as human beings can influence how civic groups as well as Christian churches can express true Christian caring.

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