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## HE SAID WHAT? SUFFERING PERSONAL EVIL FOR GOOD

by Ryan Steinbach

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“But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two.”  
(Matt. 5:39–41 NKJV)

In my relatively few years as a studying Christian, I have heard many teachings regarding the Sermon on the Mount. Who hasn't heard the words “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (v. 3) or the other Beatitudes that speak of the comforts and rewards awaiting those of us who follow our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? However, verses 39 to 41 rarely make the Sunday morning cut. It is hard to tell American Christians—sons and daughters of the American Revolution, citizens of the most powerful nation on Earth—to lose, and to do so with purpose.

Yet this is clearly what Christ said. I wonder how many people in the back of the crowd that day slipped out at this point in the sermon. Keep in mind that He said verse 41 (“go two miles”) to an audience that were slaves to the brutal Roman Empire. They were probably all too accustomed to the law that allowed a Roman soldier to order them to carry his gear for up to one mile. Now, the Messiah they had been hoping would bring liberation from the Romans instructs them to give the Roman soldier an extra mile as a personal pack mule.

Yet it is exactly this kind of uncommon good that stands the best chance to win over the very souls that curse Christ and hold His followers in derision. Let's make one thing perfectly clear: turning the other cheek is neither cowardly nor passive. It may take more courage and love than most of us have on our own. We would understand

someone running from a bully after getting punched. We would probably cheer for the person who knocked the bully on his back and put him in his place. Our Heavenly Father, however, cheers when we stand unafraid of evil but unwilling to strike in vengeance at one of our fellow creations in His image.

A few qualifications before I continue: please don't think I am opposed to the Revolutionary War or advocating that evil be allowed to prevail in all circumstances. Romans 13 is abundantly clear that there is a distinction between the person and the state, and the state is given the sword for purposes of justice and defense.<sup>1</sup> There is also sharp contrast between permitting evil to occur to oneself and permitting it to occur to others. A Christian should do anything possible to prevent harm or suffering to others. And even when it comes to ourselves, there is distinction between suffering for Christ and suffering for the sake of suffering.<sup>2</sup> We are called to be witnesses, not masochists. Self-defense from criminal violence is commendable. After all, we bear the image of God as well. The suffering in view here is that of indignity. In requiring His followers to "turn the other cheek," "give your tunic and cloak," and "go the extra mile," Christ directed transformative responses to legal oppression and insult.<sup>3</sup> The instruction is to decide against retribution and choose humiliation, even if it involves harm, and especially if it means the opportunity to demonstrate the love of Christ. Love for others over ourselves is the virtue that unites these seemingly contradictory responses. The power of accepting personal loss comes in the confusion it causes for those inflicting the pain. They mean to hurt us. They desire to see us crumble or betray Christ by reacting just as they would. In other words, they can dismiss Christians if they can excuse us as weak or no different from anyone else. Instead, we are called to respond to cruelty with defiant love. Not to accept evil as if it were benign but to love our persecutor despite their evil actions, just as God loved us despite ours.

**Examples in Our Stars.** This is not natural to us, especially in our society. I have yet to play the sport or video game where you can win by letting your opponent score or defeat you.

Instead, we are a culture of hero worship, and our heroes don't just win; they pummel opponents into submission. We cheer on our fantasy football quarterbacks as they run up the score on a thoroughly defeated team, because we gain a vicarious victory over our friends and family. We no longer set out simply to save a princess, we play for hours until we have unlocked every secret, mastered every move, and utterly dominated the game, joining the 100 percent club. We watch the laws that govern our lives debated in the media, not for the substance of the law itself but on the terms of a continuing battle between two political parties, and which party won or lost ground

with the law's passage. We crave victory in every aspect of our existence. We are a society of winners and losers, and no one wants to wear the L.

Yet there is one cultural phenomenon that is back in our lives, which happens to display beautifully the concept Christ laid out for Christians more than two millennia ago. Star Wars returned this winter to continue the story for billions of fans around the world.<sup>4</sup> *The Force Awakens* picked up years after Luke Skywalker became the last force fighter standing at the end of *Return of the Jedi*. Luke didn't win by slaying his enemy, however. He steadfastly refused to strike the emperor or kill Darth Vader.

It shouldn't be a spoiler for anyone to say he suffered greatly to earn his victory. As Luke was lit up by the emperor, his father watched him suffer. This is a father who had fought his own son, taken his hand, had his hand taken in turn, and had invaded his son's mind in an effort to turn him to the dark side he believed would bring order through power. It wasn't until he saw Luke suffer for his refusal to give in to his anger that Vader finally turned against the evil that had corrupted and dominated his mind for decades. Luke's loss was the way that led to Vader's gain, and Luke won back his father by choosing to suffer evil instead of slay it.

When Vader sees his son choose valor over victory, he understands what the instruction of Obi-Wan and the warnings of Yoda never could teach him. He finally recognizes the emperor, and the power he stands for, as monstrous instead of orderly. He finally rejects brute force for the power of love.

**Examples in the Word.** Even a cursory reading of the New Testament will bear plenty of examples of how choosing to lose brings about big victories. Certainly, the best example comes from Christ Himself, who provided our greatest victory of all when He chose to lose His life to pay for our sins. He tells His followers to be willing to do the same for our own victories.<sup>5</sup> However, Jesus had the advantage of being God and knowing the outcome of His choice to lose. This doesn't cheapen His sacrifice or suffering at all. I just don't want to leave any of us a possible out on this concept.

So, let's use another beautiful example of His followers applying this principle through faith. It comes to us in the account of the Philippian jailer.<sup>6</sup> Paul and Silas were stripped, beaten, and bleeding in his prison. The jailer himself had placed their feet in stocks and locked them in the inner prison, where conditions would have been worst. They had no trial and had done no wrong. In fact, they had cast a demon out of a girl. They passed their time praying and singing hymns. As the other prisoners listened, the jailer slept. Then, at midnight, God used a great earthquake to shake the foundations of the prison, open the doors of the cells, and break the chains that held the prisoners.

At this point, we would probably have cheered to read “and that is how God delivered Paul and Silas from their unjust imprisonment.” That is probably the ending we would want God to write if we were imprisoned unjustly today. However, that is not how this account ends. Instead, the jailer wakes, sees the doors are flung open, assumes everyone ran (wouldn’t you?), so he prepares to kill himself.<sup>7</sup> But as he prepared to do so, Paul and Silas called from the inner room and said, “Do yourself no harm, for we are all here.” Here is that moment of uncommon good. Freedom was theirs for the taking, and not one of us would blame them for taking it. They not only stayed but also got the other prisoners to stay out of concern for the jailer’s life.

This radical love, demonstrated by loss, is what made the jailer tremble. He slept through the prayers and hymns. But when Paul and Silas were uncommonly good to the man who had placed them in stocks, he trembled, fell down before them, and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

As always, God’s way was better. Paul and Silas chose the uncommon good and saved the jailer twice that night. They may have looked worse for the wear, but they had won a victory that would not have been possible without their loss.

**The Choice Is Ours.** One thing we do not sacrifice when we accept Christ as our savior is our free will. We still need to make our choices to lose when challenged in matters that involve our faith. It is more likely that this will involve humiliation than wrongful imprisonment or a few thousand volts of electricity, but that doesn’t make it easier. No matter what the stakes are, we need prayerfully to seek the humility, courage, and the true love it takes to lose, so that we might win others to Christ. —*Ryan Steinbach*

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## NOTES

- 1 Romans 13:4.
- 2 Robertson McQuilkin and Paul Copan, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics: Walking in the Way of Wisdom*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 350.
- 3 Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 60; McQuilkin and Copan, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics*, 352–53.
- 4 Of course, the Star Wars movies are not a representation of a Christian worldview. See *Christian Research Journal* 38, 5 (2015).
- 5 Matthew 10:39; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; John 12:25.

- 6 Acts 16:16–34.
- 7 A Roman soldier who let a prisoner escape paid for his negligence with his own life (Acts 12:19; 27:42).