**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**MATTHEW-026. NON-RESISTANCE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"38. Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: 39. But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. 40. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. 41. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. 42. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away."*

*Matthew 5:38-42*

The old law directed judges to inflict penalties precisely equivalent to offences--an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth (Exod. 21:24), but that direction was not for the guidance of individuals. It was suited for the stage of civilisation in which it was given, and probably was then a restriction, rather than a sanction, of the wild law of retaliation. Jesus sweeps it away entirely, and goes much further than even its abrogation. For He forbids not only retaliation but even resistance. It is unfortunate that in this, as in so many instances, controversy as to the range of Christ's words has so largely hustled obedience to them out of the field, that the first thought suggested to a modern reader by the command Resist not evil (or, an evil man) is apt to be, Is the Quaker doctrine of uniform non-resistance right or wrong, instead of, Do I obey this precept? If we first try to understand its meaning, we shall be in a position to consider whether it has limits, springing from its own deepest significance, or not. What, then, is it not to resist? Our Lord gives three concrete illustrations of what He enjoins, the first of which refers to insults such as contumelious blows on the cheek, which are perhaps the hardest not to meet with a flash of anger and a returning stroke; the second of which refers to assaults on property, such as an attempt at legal robbery of a man's undergarment; the third of which refers to forced labour, such as impressing a peasant to carry military or official baggage or documents--a form of oppression only too well known under Roman rule in Christ's days. In regard to all three cases, He bids His disciples submit to the indignity, yield the coat, and go the mile. But such yielding without resistance is not to be all. The other cheek is to be given to the smiter; the more costly and ample outer garment is to be yielded up; the load is to be carried for two miles. The disciple is to meet evil with a manifestation, not of anger, hatred, or intent to inflict retribution, but of readiness to submit to more. It is a hard lesson, but clearly here, as always, the chief stress is to be laid, not on the outward action, but on the disposition, and on the action mainly as the outcome and exhibition of that. If the cheek is turned, or the cloak yielded, or the second mile trudged with a lowering brow, and hate or anger boiling in the heart, the commandment is broken. If the inner man rises in hot indignation against the evil and its doer, he is resisting evil more harmfully to himself than is many a man who makes his adversary's cheeks tingle before his own have ceased to be reddened. We have to get down into the depths of the soul, before we understand the meaning of non-resistance. It would have been better if the eager controversy about the breadth of this commandment had oftener become a study of its depth, and if, instead of asking, Are we ever warranted in resisting? men had asked, What in its full meaning is non-resistance? The truest answer is that it is a form of Love,--love in the face of insults, wrongs, and domineering tyranny, such as are illustrated in Christ's examples. This article of Christ's New Law comes last but one in the series of instances in which His transfiguring touch is laid on the Old Law, and the last of the series is that to which He has been steadily advancing from the first--namely, the great Commandment of Love. This precept stands immediately before that, and prepares for it. It is, as suffused with the light of the sun that is all but risen, Resist not evil, for Love beareth all things.

It is but a shallow stream that is worried into foam and made angry and noisy by the stones in its bed; a deep river flows smooth and silent above them. Nothing will enable us to meet evil with a patient yielding love which does not bring the faintest tinge of anger even into the cheek reddened by a rude hand, but the love of God shed abroad in the heart, and when that love fills a man, out of him will flow a river of living water, which will bury evil below its clear, gentle abundance, and, perchance, wash it of its foulness. The quality of this non-resistance is twice blessed, it blesseth him that gives and him that takes. For the disciple who submits in love, there is the gain of freedom from the perturbations of passion, and of steadfast abiding in the peace of a great charity, the deliverance from the temptation of descending to the level of the wrong-doer, and of losing hold of God and all high visions. The tempest-ruffled sea mirrors no stars by night, nor is blued by day. If we are to have real communion with God, we must not flush with indignation at evil, nor pant with desire to shoot the arrow back to him that aimed it at us. And in regard to the evil-doer, the most effectual resistance is, in many cases, not to resist. There is something hid away somewhere in most men's hearts which makes them ashamed of smiting the offered left cheek, and then ashamed of having smitten the right one. It is a shame to hit him, since he does not defend himself, comes into many a ruffian's mind. The safest way to travel in savage countries is to show oneself quite unarmed. He that meets evil with evil is overcome of evil; he that meets it with patient love is likely in most cases to overcome evil with good. And even if he fails, he has, at all events, used the only weapon that has any chance of beating down the evil, and it is better to be defeated when fighting hate with love than to be victorious when fighting it with itself, or demanding an eye for an eye.

But, if we take the right view of this precept, its limitations are in itself. Since it is love confronting, and seeking to transform evil into its own likeness, it may sometimes be obliged by its own self not to yield. If turning the other cheek would but make the assaulter more angry, or if yielding the cloak would but make the legal robber more greedy, or if going the second mile would but make the press-gang more severe and exacting, resistance becomes a form of love and a duty for the sake of the wrong-doer. It may also become a duty for the sake of others, who are also objects of love, such as helpless persons who otherwise would be exposed to evil, or society as a whole. But while clearly that limit is prescribed by the very nature of the precept, the resistance which it permits must have love to the culprit or to others as its motive, and not be tainted by the least suspicion of passion or vengeance. Would that professing Christians would try more to purge their own hearts, and bring this solemn precept into their daily lives, instead of discussing whether there are cases in which it does not apply! There are great tracts in the lives of all of us to which it should apply and is not applied; and we had better seek to bring these under its dominion first, and then it will be time enough to debate as to whether any circumstances are outside its dominion or not.