

The Way of Perfection (Mat 5: 38-48).

* Once I was told, “pastor, why not get people’s attention to your own stories when you preach?”

As I remember, I’ve given voice to some of my stories while preaching. Well, in connection with the lesson of this day, I have something to say. Here it is another story. Almost twenty years ago the Lord started a local church in my hometown after a certain missionary work had been done. During my service in that church as a pastor, we organized two summer camps for teens. With the event I am talking about, five missionaries arrived from Wisconsin; among them was a professor, two teachers of an elementary school, a pastor and a translator. After their arrival, they engaged the students in the teaching of the Bible and in entertaining them for two weeks. I believe the children had an exciting time, especially if we take into account the fact that the camp was surrounded by a forest within walking distance of a pretty river, and the weather also was lovely. On a certain day the teachers and some children gathered at a bank of the river; sitting around the fire, telling stories, and singing and praying, we didn’t note as a good time to get home passed by. When we were packing our bags, darkness gradually came over the land. The folks remarked that *misfortunes never come singly*, and it was true because very soon we realized that there were no flashlights with us, there was no moon in the sky, and nobody could see a track meandering through the dense grove.

To be sure that nobody would get lost, we linked together hand by hand, thereby forming a chain. There were thirty or so of us. I led that chain when we entered into the grove, it was so dark that I couldn’t see even my hand in front of my face. Slowly we moved ahead; particularly at that time I had a feeling that somebody supervised each of my forward steps until we got out of the woods. Thanks to the Lord, nobody got lost or fell down. The pastor who followed after me said that he was as a blind man and I as Moses. That crossing still lives in my memory in detail, even though it happened about 16 years ago.

* Unfolding the topic of a blind man as a leader, we find another illustration – an oil painting, *The Blind Leading the Blind* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. But at this stage, it contrasts the previous illustration with a different number of blind people and with a much worst-case scenario. The provided footnote says, *There are six blind men going forward one after the other. A blind guide goes first and falls in a hole with his staff. The next blind man trips over the first one. The third connected with the second with a staff follow his predecessor. The fifth and the sixth don't yet know what is happening but will fall into the hole at the end.* As you guess, this painting reflects on a rhetorical question being addressed by Jesus to his listeners and to us as well, *"Can the blind lead the blind? Will they not both fall into the ditch?"* (Luk 6:39). The answer may be: *No, they will not fall into a ditch until they are on a beach.* But as soon as they leave it, they certainly will fall in a ditch.

* It is vitally important to allow us to be led by the Spirit of God, but if people don't care, the spiritual blindness remains in them; they are led by the sinful flesh and by the devil. The worst-case scenario here is that the "blind" people follow a leader who is "blind" too. The Word of God teaches, inevitably all of them will be caught in a snare by the love of this world that is unspiritual and demonic, (2Ti 4:3). On the other hand, those who are led by the Spirit have received inward eyes that can see troubles ahead and escape traps, (Act 27:10).

* Significantly, the teaching of the perfect righteousness (Mat 5:38-48), we are assigned for today may be turned into a snare if we are allowed to be led by a blind flesh. Before saying how a good may be turned into a bad, we like to read the lesson again. There are two topics, *Retaliation* and *Love for Enemies*. Today we detail the first topic only due to the limited time. It opens with an introductory phrase, *You have heard that it was said*, and it continues, *'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'* *But I say to you, do not resist the evildoer. But whoever strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other to him as well. And if someone wants to sue you and to take your tunic, give him your coat also. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to the one who asks you, and do not reject the one who wants to borrow from you,* (vv.38-42).

* When trying to avoid the uncompromised teaching of truth, the sinful flesh calls this radicalism, and radicalism sounds like something detestable in our ears. Some say, we should recognize the difference between *you must* and *you can* in Jesus' teaching. Certainly you cannot bear such things, except Jesus; therefore, if it happens, you are free from that *you must*. Next, some say if you are struck on your right cheek, turn your left cheek for the next blow. Again, some may quote the teaching where it says, if a person begs you give him whatever he needs, goods or money and don't ask back. Also some say, if a man exploits you be patient and let him do it, or when someone takes advantage of you, bear your cross quietly. *Friends, could you follow this teaching, the blind say, or are you too weak? The alternative for your "cannon" is here, they say, in your confession and absolution: "We have not loved Jesus with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves" Then, after hearing your pastor, "... I therefore forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit." you should say, Amen. That is all, you are forgiven and you are happy.* In the end the blind teachers say, *Friends, don't you like us?* We are not going to dispute this matter because one's like apples another like oranges, is the answer.

* Like the blind who found a solution exclusively in confession and absolution, we also come up with a satisfactory solution but it is quite different. First, according to the fathers of the Church, such as Origen, Augustine and Cassian, the teaching of *Retaliation* first needs to be approached in a spiritual level, not literal only, they say; otherwise, this teaching would contradict Jesus' and Paul's behavior when people tried to take

advantage of them. When Paul was arrested and brought to the council in Jerusalem, the high priest Ananias ordered a guard to strike him on the mouth while Paul was speaking out. Paul's response to that was quite different to what we read in (Mat 5:39). *"God is going to strike you, Paul said, you whitewashed wall! Do you sit there judging me according to the law, and in violation of the law you order me to be struck?"* (Act 23:3). We see the same picture with Jesus. When one of the high priest's officers struck Jesus on the face, he didn't turn the other cheek, but acted quite differently from what he taught in Mat 5, *"If I have said something wrong, confirm what is wrong. But if I spoke correctly, why strike me?"* said Jesus, (Joh 18:23). Can you see the difference?

* Friends, good news, if somebody strikes you on the cheek, Jesus doesn't want you to turn the other one; then, what does Jesus expect, you may ask? The answer is simple; just follow Jesus and Paul's examples and you'll never be ashamed.

But what do we suppose do if someone is trying to take advantage of us, or impels us to serve him as a slave, or wants us to make a profit from us without limit? Friends, again good news, you don't have to if it comes into conflict with your responsibilities toward your family, community, or your homeland. In other words, the law of love cannot be compromised by someone's injustice and insult, (2Co 11:20,21).

* Now, after giving exposition on the teaching of the perfect righteousness, we came to the conclusion that this teaching is about state of mind and heart rather than about the total subjection to the evil one.

The true meaning of the teaching is that when we are inflicted by someone's unjust and violent behavior, we shouldn't allow anger take advantage of our heart and mind; no evil at all should be inflicted in return for evil. This is quite a different solution to what is offered by the blind teachers. Peace that is beyond words comes to us naturally when there is no wish at all for retaliation.

* Friends, we still have the time and opportunity to run for perfection; there are still some people around who inflict us by words or deeds. Now prove to Jesus and to the people of your community that you are really the beloved sons and daughters of your Heavenly Father, who has compassion for us, who doesn't want any of us to perish and that we have love instead of hate.

Beloved watch over your heart and mind so that evil desires don't take advantage of you.

Amen.