

7th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

St. Matthew 5:38-48

To better understand this Gospel it helps to understand its social context. For example, to a first century Palestinian Jew, slapping someone on the face with the back of the hand is twice as insulting as slapping him with the palm of the hand so a right-handed person slapping someone on the right cheek implies just such a backhanded slap. Another example: by law, a Jew could be forced to hand over a tunic as payment as compensation. Even poor a man of the time would have owned two tunics. But he was never expected to give his cloak because more often than not a man had only one cloak, and it was used not only his coat during the day, but also his blanket at night. And again, Palestine during the time of the Lord was under direct Roman control and as the occupying forces they were permitted by law to enlist others as guides or pack-bearers for one mile of any journey they may be taking. So, what is the Lord really asking of us when He tells us to turn the other cheek, to hand over our cloak as well as our tunic, and to voluntarily go an extra mile? He is teaching us how to respond to personal insults and humiliations. It was humiliating and offensive to be slapped on the right cheek, to be forced to hand over a tunic to pay a debt, to be consigned to carrying a foreigner's baggage in your own homeland. The Lord wants us to respond to personal insults with grace, patience, and forgiveness. He wants us to break the cycle of violence by not always insisting on getting our own way, but going out of our way to do good to others, even when they do not deserve it.

Forgiveness is not easy. We would prefer to condemn another and call it justice than to forgive for the sake of mercy. Forgiveness damages our pride, it undermines our sense of justice and our sense of our rights. Often forgiveness

feels as though we are condoning injustice, that we are excusing the wrong done. However, forgiveness is not condoning injustice or excusing wrong. Forgiveness means that we condemn what is unjust and we do not excuse what is evil—but we condemn what has been done but we do not condemn the person.

To forgive means to free the other from the guilt of what they done but not from their responsibility. To forgive means that we free ourselves from the poison of bitterness and resentment. To forgive means not that we change the other person but that we change ourselves. To forgive means that we change how we respond to a situation that we cannot change.