

The fourth spiritual work of mercy is one that is simple in theory, but difficult in practice: “to bear wrongs patiently.” We all know how to be charitable and patient to those who are pleasant, kind and humble. However, our initial reaction is not “patience” when someone cuts in line in front of us after waiting for an hour at the DMV.

Jesus had much to say in regards to this spiritual work of mercy. He said,

“You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.” (Matthew 5:38-41)

Jesus’ instruction to “turn the other cheek” is radically different than what the world (and our own sinful hearts) want to do. We feel that when someone hurts us in some way we must “return the favor.” In our own minds, we believe we are “justified” in slapping someone back or regaining our spot in line. We say to ourselves “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth!”

What is even more controversial is what Jesus said following this passage. He goes even deeper saying,

“You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:43-48)

While in a certain sense “justice” appears to say that we should return evil for evil, God does not want us to base our actions on what the world says. He desires that we be “perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” This means that we need to battle our inner tendencies and not “fight fire with fire,” but seek the “high road” that leads to salvation.

This spiritual work of mercy received its purest expression in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. While reading the Passion narrative during Holy Week our hearts cry out and we want to say to Jesus “You can stop all of this! You are God! Throw down fire and smite these evil Romans!” That is exactly what the Apostles would have said, as revealed in this episode in the Gospels,

“And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make ready for him; but the people would not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, ‘Lord, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?’ But he turned and rebuked them. And they went on to another village.” (Luke 9:51-59, emphasis added)

“Bearing wrongs patiently” is not easy. You could say that it is not even “human” to do so. It goes against every fiber of our fallen nature. That is why when someone hurts us we must not act as a “human,” but follow the example of God incarnate.

This work of mercy is “spiritual” for a reason; it requires divine grace to be successful.

From a “human” point of view, we often think that “revenge” will solve our problems. If a friend of ours steals something precious to us, we think that the only logical response is to steal something from them; in that way, we will be “even.” Or if someone slanders us on Facebook, we believe that the proper response is to slander him or her even more. We somehow think that doing an evil deed will overcome an evil deed done to us and bring satisfaction.

What we fail to realize is that in the spiritual world we cannot “fight fire with fire” or try to defeat “darkness with darkness.” In the same way that water extinguishes a raging fire, only humility, patience and mercy can destroy the effects of sin.

One of the many saints who gave us examples on how to perform this work of mercy is Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. While in the convent her first “victory” consisted in “bearing wrongs patiently.” She narrates in her Story of a Soul,

“A small jar, left behind a window, was found broken. No one knew who had put it there, but our Mistress was displeased, and, thinking I was to blame in leaving it about, told me I was very untidy and must be more careful in future. Without answering, I kissed the ground and promised to be more observant. I was so little advanced in virtue that these small sacrifices cost me dear, and I had to console myself with the thought that at the day of Judgment all would be known.”

Similarly, Saint Thérèse was tested in this work of mercy when a fellow nun annoyed her during prayer,

“For a long time my place at meditation was near a Sister who fidgeted continually, either with her Rosary, or something else; possibly, as I am very quick of hearing, I alone heard her, but I cannot tell you how much it tried me. I should have liked to turn round, and by looking at the offender, make her stop the noise; but in my heart I knew that I ought to bear it tranquilly, both for the love of God and to avoid giving pain. So I kept quiet, but the effort cost me so much that sometimes I was bathed in perspiration, and my meditation consisted merely in suffering with patience.”

Going forward, let us learn from the example of Saint Thérèse and combat the sinful desires in our heart. We might want to strike back at someone, even for such a small thing as being annoying in the adoration chapel, but we must not let our fallen nature overtake us. We must allow God to penetrate our heart and transform it into something new. Let us recite often the refrain (especially during temptation):

“O Sacred Heart of Jesus, make my heart like unto Thine!”