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Do We Have to "Turn the Other Cheek"?

Matthew 5:38-39: (NASB) *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 an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.*



Life has really changed. With all of the amazing connectedness we have through social media, we are more alone than ever. We see people via Facetime, but we cannot touch them. We "chat" without talking. We "like" without truly feeling emotion, we "follow" without knowing where we are going, and we "join" without ever going anywhere. As a result of all of this non-active activity, when someone crosses us in any of these virtual environments, we can snap back at them in so many ways without having to actually face them. We tweet, post, Instagram, email, text - all with anonymity. Funny, Jesus specifically taught us to "turn the other cheek," not to virtually smack them upside their head! What does turning the other cheek even mean, and how do we apply it in both our real and virtual worlds? Is this teaching of Jesus still as relevant and powerful as it was centuries ago?

The beginning of Matthew 5 is the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is addressing his followers directly, though he has a multitude listening in. Much of this lesson is about the attitude that should provoke our action; *Blessed is... ye are the salt of the earth... and let your light shine*, are the themes of the first 16 verses.

Here is the conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount: Matthew 5:16: (NASB) *Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.*

But it is also an introduction to the next section of Jesus' teaching.

This next section is a critical transition. Up to this point, Jesus has been building his followers' understanding of Christianity based upon the principles of righteousness and love. He has not yet specifically referred to his disciples' base of spiritual understanding, the Law. He first set their hearts and minds in place and would now address the Law and carefully build his reasoning upon the base of the Law. He fulfilled this Law and showed us how to live it in the highest way.

Matthew 5:17-18: Jesus respected the Jewish Law. As Christians, should we be following the Law? There are 613 aspects of the Law - it goes well beyond the Ten Commandments.

In this themed reasoning, Jesus does three things: 1. He clarifies the value of the Law. 2. He builds upon the base of the Law to bring out the deeper meaning of the spirit of the Law. 3. He specifically compares the actual Law and some of its interpretations with his higher teaching.

Matthew 5:20: (NASB) *For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.*

Jesus shows us this comparison through the phrase: *But I say unto you...*, which was not only lifting the Law to a higher standard but also correcting their misuse of the Law. He was telling us, "Your righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees." For many of the Pharisees, it was all an act and they looked religious only on the outside.

But I say unto you teaches us:

- Do not carry your anger (forgive/let it go) (verse 22)
- Do not lust (what goes on in your heart is just as important as what happens on the outside) (verse 28)
- Do not inappropriately divorce (verse 32)
- Let your "yes" be "yes" (keep your commitments) (verse 37)
- Turn the other cheek (verse 39)
- Love your enemies (verse 44)

Cheek Turning Lesson: Turning the other cheek is one small part of a much bigger life lesson



**Jesus said not to resist an evil person.
Did he mean for us to just stand there and invite a beating?**

This is a huge question and answering it will directly impact how we come to understand the whole "turning the other cheek" thing. To really absorb what Jesus is saying, we would logically have to go back into the Old Testament and examine the parts of the Law he references.

Matthew 5:38-39 (the higher standard) compared to Leviticus 24:17-20

Here confusion can begin, since we are given many Scriptures telling us it IS appropriate to resist: James 4:7 Ephesians 6:13: We are to withstand not just Satan, but all evil.

By reviewing the Old Testament text from which Jesus quotes and defining the words he used, it becomes easier to see that Jesus is saying - rather than an eye for an eye - do not entangle ourselves with getting even, getting back at someone or wanting to do another hurt because we have been hurt. Today's social media makes it easy to be dark, insulting, degrading and critical because it is not face-to-face. Our society has become childish. The new response to eye for eye/tooth for tooth: Do not get emotionally, personally involved with settling the score. We are to rise above such things.

More clarity can be found when we observe how Jesus told his followers to respond to hatred: Matthew 10:22-23: *But whenever they persecute you in one city, flee to the next* - are we to run and hide when the heat turns up? Are we supposed to be cowards? He is not telling us to run away from the persecution; but run away from the temptation to persecute back. Run away from retaliating and escalating a situation out of control.

Flee to the next meant "Be about your Father's business. Do not get tangled up in the mess of getting back at people. Do not be so discouraged that you forget your mission. You do not have time to face off with those who would do harm. Simply continue the work which you are commissioned to do. You have work that is bigger than 'showing them who is boss'." We cannot let "self" be more important than the work.

Even greater clarity can be found in Jesus' own response to those who would do harm: Matthew 26:51-53: Jesus showed us not to get involved in retaliation; in fact, he healed the ear of his enemy in the verses that followed. Being obedient to our call to sacrifice is THE most important thing!

Cheek Turning Lesson: Turning the other cheek is based on the premise that we know and commit to the preeminence of living sacrificially first and foremost!

The phrase "turning the other cheek" is primarily symbolic, but it certainly can be fulfilled literally! Putting all of this in order has everything to do with absorbing not only the context of the statement, but also the language and symbols of Jesus' time. Matthew 5:39: *Whoever slaps you* - this means what it says and can also mean to strike with a rod or staff.

On your right cheek - why not on the left cheek? Does this mean if we are hit on the left cheek we can hit them back? Why specifically the right cheek?

Check the context from a few verses earlier to understand the meaning: Matthew 5:29-30: Is Jesus teaching us to mutilate ourselves? No, this is symbolic. We are not to tear our eyes out or cut off our hand. What is it about the *right eye*, *right hand* and *right cheek*?

Throughout the Bible, the right side was always considered the side of honor, power and authority: *The right hand of the throne of God* - (similar expression found in Acts 7:55-56, Romans 8:34, Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3, 8:1, 10:12 and other places) is a symbol of the most highly honored place. A scepter in His right hand is a symbol of power and authority. The right side gives the sense of the strongest power and authority.

As Jesus teaches, he is building a "prepare-for-the-kingdom" thought pattern. This whole section of Matthew 5 is focusing on the absolute importance of self-control in any and all circumstances. *Your right eye* - a symbol of the source of your most powerful and authoritative **observations**. If it brings you to lust, then be rid of such powerful and authoritative observations. *Your right eye* is the best version of "you." If that in any way brings you to inappropriate desires, then get rid of it. Do not coddle it; get rid of it. What you observe must be in line with Christlikeness. *Your right hand* - a symbol of the source of your



most powerful and authoritative **actions**. If it brings you to any measure of compromised experience, then be rid of such powerful and authoritative actions. Hands symbolize actions. Do not coddle it; get rid of it. Do not leave the door open for Satan to work on you with these weaknesses. **STAND, STOP and MOVE AWAY**. This is a complete change in direction, not giving it a minute of thought or action. *Your right cheek* - the most powerful and authoritative representation of **yourself**. If someone humiliates this representation of you, then **ACCEPT IT** with grace, for this is sacrifice. This is a metaphor for someone insulting you, humiliating you, the best representation of you. This is hard to take, but we are to accept it.

Isaiah 50:6: This is what Jesus endured. *I gave my back to those who strike me* - he let them hit him. He allowed the humiliation of being tortured illegally because he was about something bigger. Lamentations 3:30

Let us pause here and observe Jesus' own living of this teaching: Luke 22:63-64: He responded to this smiting with love and humility. **This details his reaction:** Isaiah 53:7: This is another prophecy that details the reactions of Jesus. Jesus was the highest representation of God's will on earth. There was no higher earthly authority. Here was the example of turning the other cheek. We are to live as he lived.

Cheek Turning Lesson: To turn the other cheek is the outward expression of a heart tuned in to the kingdom.

Jesus makes this profound lesson of spiritual thinking the basis for the next levels of lessons. He has been bringing us up a spiritual ladder, and just when we thought we were at the top there are more rungs and they are clear examples of turning the other cheek in different areas of life.

Compare Matthew 5:40 (the higher standard) with Exodus 22:26-27. The Jews were not supposed to keep someone's cloak overnight. It was returned as a sign of respect and compassion so that the debtor would have comfort while he slept. Is Jesus teaching us to not even get our "coat" back?

A Christian standard from the Apostle Paul: 1 Corinthians 6:7: This is talking about issues between the brotherhood. Their thinking was worldly. They were instead supposed to turn the other cheek, be okay with having their best representation of themselves be humiliated. The "turn the other cheek" mentality goes beyond a physical altercation.

Jesus stood for righteousness all his life but turning the other cheek eventually cost him his life, enabling him to give himself as a ransom for all of mankind.

To abide by the *spirit of the Law*, the "prepare for the kingdom" thought pattern of turning the other cheek implies maturity, wisdom and an understanding of spiritual foresight.

The "letter" of the Law seeks an outward compliance to the Law. The "spirit" of the Law seeks an inward compliance to the footsteps of Jesus; being willing to suffer for Christ's sake. The spirit of the Law is much higher and powerful. The footsteps of Jesus were footsteps no one else had ever walked. We are invited to follow in those steps.

Matthew 5:41: (NASB) *Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two.*

A specific example of this near the end of Jesus' life: Matthew 27:31-32: If pressed into service, do it with grace and compassion. This is still part of "turning the other cheek."

The "prepare-for-the-kingdom thought pattern" of turning the other cheek implies a willingness to give with grace beyond what may be required. This should all be done with a heart toward God.

The thinking of the Pharisees would be, "Oh, I am willing to show the people just how much I can suffer! Just watch me!" You can do the right thing for the wrong reasons and not be blessed. We want to go beyond doing just the right thing and do the spiritual thing, which is higher and involves self-sacrificing. In *all* aspects of our life, we need to be willing to rise above and give our best with grace.

Compare Matthew 5:42 (the higher standard) with Deuteronomy 15:7. Jesus is saying, "Live up to and well beyond the very highest and most selfless standard shown to you in the Law."

Cheek Turning Lesson: To turn the other cheek is reflected and expressed in giving, service and generosity.



Every profound teaching of Jesus always comes to the point where we say, "This is a really amazing lesson...what am I supposed to do with it?" For most of us, applying such a lofty and spiritual standard to our everyday lives requires measured steps beginning with an understanding of where we are starting.

John 18:35-36: We begin with Jesus and the ultimate reason for turning the other cheek: this world holds nothing of lasting value and God's kingdom does. What we stand for is not of this world. If we can understand that, we will lose the desire to fight for something that is *not* about the kingdom.

Matthew 10:16-17: Know that your Christianity will not be generally met with openness and understanding. Every turn of our lives gives opportunity for both spiritual and worldly response. Which one?

Galatians 5:13-16: Christian liberty is both the greatest opportunity and the greatest test of our lives. Seize the opportunity by seizing control of your human heart and mind.

Just because we focus our hearts and minds towards Christ does not mean we will be conflict free: 1 Peter 3:8-9: *Inherit a blessing* - you cannot inherit something of great spiritual value unless you live a life of great spiritual value. This requires turning the other cheek, as it is part of the process of becoming a footstep follower of Jesus.

Be intentional as you focus on rising to higher levels of turning the other cheek. Do not do it because you are forced into it.

Spiritual focus is often finally and most thoroughly tested by our interactions with persecution: Romans 12:14-17: Be willing to be wronged, be engaged with those who are righteous, live according to righteousness and peace at whatever personal expense is necessary.

Cheek Turning Lesson: Truly living a turning the other cheek life is only possible when we realize that its humility must permeate every aspect of our thoughts words and deeds - that's what Jesus did!

This is a way of life: Dignity in the face of disparagement. Humility in the face of harassment. It gives us a sense of true Christian value. Is that not what we are supposed to be about? Turning the other cheek is hard but can be done with a lot of practice and prayer.

*So, do we really have to turn the other cheek?
For Jonathan and Rick and Christian Questions...
Think about it...!*