
Classics / Bible Studies

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Turning The Other Cheek

*“But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” –
Matthew 5:39*

Summary: The natural difficulty of this saying – Israel’s law put limitations on vengeance – Jesus limits retaliation even further – the way of Christ – the sphere of personal behaviour – applying this command in the modern world requires careful thought – the mind of Christ – what about secular communities? – what about a political office?

This is a hard saying because it prescribes a course of action that does not come naturally to us. This is one of several examples in which Jesus shows that the lifestyle of the kingdom of God is more demanding than the law of Moses.

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (Matthew 5:38), and this was part of Israel's earliest law code (Exodus 21:24). When this law was first stated, it marked a great step forward, for it placed a strict limitation on vengeance. An earlier system of justice held that if a member of tribe X injured a member of tribe Y, tribe Y was obliged to retaliate against tribe X. This quickly

escalated into a blood feud between the two tribes, resulting in suffering far exceeding the original injury.

But Israel's law-code restricted this and incorporated the principle of exact retaliation: one eye, and no more, for an eye; one life, and no more, for a life. When wounded honour was satisfied by such precise laws, life was much less hazardous, and it was also easier to accept monetary compensation in many cases as a reasonable substitute for injury or offence.

But now Jesus takes a further step. Unprovoked assault naturally prompts resentment and retaliation. Yet "Don't retaliate at all," Jesus says to his disciples. "Don't harbour a spirit of resentment; if someone does you an injury or puts you to inconvenience,

show yourself master of the situation by doing something to his advantage. If he gets some pleasure out of hitting you, let him hit you again" (this should not be taken literally, any more than plucking out one's right eye and throwing it away).

Jesus gives us two examples: carrying a tunic and going the extra mile (Matthew 5:40-41). If a soldier or other government official conscripts your services to carry a load for him over a stipulated distance, you are compelled to do so. But when you have reached the end of that distance, you are free again; then you can say to him, "If you'd like it carried farther, I will gladly carry it for you." The initiative is now yours: you can take it, not with a sense of grievance at being put to such inconvenience, but by performing an

act of grace. This way of responding to violence and compulsion is the way of Christ, the spirit of grace and generosity.

It is not an everyday occurrence in the modern world to be called on to carry a soldier's pack. So how could Jesus's injunction be applied to our situation?

This reminds us that Jesus's injunctions are not usually carried out automatically; they often require careful thought. Whatever sacrifices he expects his followers to make, he does not ask them to sacrifice their minds. They are urged to have their minds conformed to his, and when we think carefully in the mind of Christ, we will be in accordance with the way of Christ.

Carrying out the simple injunctions of Jesus in a complex society like ours is not easy. But if there is the spirit of Jesus, the spirit of grace and generosity, we cannot go too far astray. This is the context for Jesus's admonition to his disciples to turn the other cheek. It belongs to the sphere of personal behaviour.

There are many Christians, however, who hold that this teaching should be put into practice by communities and nations as well as by individuals. For Christian communities, we would agree. But when the Church enlists the aid of the world, or the "secular arm", to promote its interests, it rarely goes well. Someone once said, "It belongs to the church of God to receive blows rather than to inflict them." And he

added, "She is an anvil that has worn out many hammers!"

But what about a political community? The situation did not arise in New Testament times. The first disciples of Jesus did not occupy positions of authority. Joseph of Arimathea might be an exception: he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the Jewish nation, and according to Luke (23:50-51), he did not go along with his colleagues' verdict against Jesus.

As the gospel spread into the Gentile world, some local churches included men who held political positions in their membership, such as Erastus, the city treasurer of Corinth. 16:23); but neither Paul nor any other New Testament writer finds it necessary to

give special instructions to Christian rulers corresponding to those given to Christian subjects. So, what happened when Christians became rulers, as some did? Can the Christian magistrate practise non-retaliation towards the criminal who comes up before him for judgment? Could the Christian king practise non-retaliation towards a neighbouring king who declared war against him?

Paul, who repeats and emphasises Jesus's teaching on non-retaliation, regards retaliation as part of the civil ruler's duty, not the individual's.

"Would you have no fear of him who is in authority?" he asks. "Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword

in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer" (Romans 13:3-4).

For Paul, the ruler was the Roman emperor or someone who held executive or judicial authority under him. But his words would prove relevant in time, for the time had not yet come (though it did come within less than ten years of those words being written) when the empire was openly hostile to the Church.

Neither had the time come when the empire submitted to the Church, and emperors began to profess and call themselves Christians. When they inherited the "sword" which their pagan predecessors had not borne in vain, how were they to use it? The answer to that question cannot be read

easily from the pages of the New Testament. It is still being asked, and rightly so, but no single answer can claim to be the truly Christian one.