

Turn the Other Cheek—Really?

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BIG SANDY, Texas—What did Jesus mean when He told His disciples to “turn the other cheek” (Matthew 5:39; Luke 6:29)?

Did He mean we should allow people to bully and abuse us, letting them physically slap us around willy-nilly? Was He really telling us to give away our clothing to those who might sue us or assault us for it?

As with any kind of understanding, context is everything in determining how to apply Scripture.

In verse 38 of Matthew 5 Jesus establishes the context. He cites the principle of retaliation enunciated in the Pentateuch: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

In other words, the normal response of human beings to mistreatment has always been to pay back in kind. “You hurt me, so I will hurt you in a similar fashion. Now we’re even.” And so the natural demand for equity or fairness is met.

Under such an ethos, if someone slaps you, you slap him back—just as hard. That just makes everything even. That’s just normal.

Jesus, though, is telling His followers that they should not seek payback for hurt. His disciples should not behave as normal.

It would be hard enough to obey if He were telling them—and us—simply not to retaliate, not to hit back when hurt.

But Jesus doesn’t stop there. The response He expects goes much further. He tells His disciples: Don’t just passively refrain from retaliation but proactively seek to behave in a way that defies every expectation. Do the diametrically opposite thing. Your response must be 180 degrees from what it normally would have been.

In other words, don’t just not retaliate. Actively help your adversary.

Don’t just remain neutral towards your enemies (which would be still be a good step above seeking revenge), but go much further by actively loving them and blessing them and doing good to them and praying for them (verse 44)!

No wonder Christians who practiced such a response were accused of having turned the world “upside down” (Acts 17:6, KJV.)

And no wonder either that Jesus calls this behavior “perfect” (verse 48). Perfection for the Christian requires going completely against the grain of the normal and natural human response to mistreatment.

Jesus Himself demonstrated this perfect behavior when He showed us His love by suffering and dying for us even when we were His enemies (Romans 5:6, 8, 10).

If we’re still wondering about justice, if we’re asking ourselves whether God condones the mistreatment of His people, the answer is clear. We are not to plot revenge. We are not to seek payback.

Justice—revenge, if necessary—belongs to God. He will mete out perfect justice, with perfect love, in His perfect time.

In the meantime, our job is to emulate the perfect love Jesus has for us. We “retaliate” with love for those who mistreat us.

Jesus was willing to love us in spite of all our faults and sins and failings. He freely gave us His love when we had treated Him with evil. He expects us to do no less for those who hurt us.