

Did Jesus Always Turn the Other Cheek?

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LEE'S SUMMIT, Mo.—One of the most heavily debated religious concepts is found in a verse (Matthew 5:39) located in Christ's teachings in what is today called the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 5:39—"But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also."

Clearly, Jesus was not joking around or simply making a suggestion when He made such a challenging statement. Turning the other cheek is exactly what Jesus did while being tried before the kangaroo courts of Pilate, Herod and the Sanhedrin.

But does this principle always apply? Or have we misunderstood what Jesus was trying to teach us?

How should someone apply Jesus' difficult statement to "turn the other cheek"? Did Jesus always ignore accusations against Him? The Gospels illustrate numerous examples of Jesus responding to false allegations, and the book of Acts has numerous examples of the apostles doing the same.

John 8 records an extensive public exchange where Jesus parries a series of false and politically motivated charges against Him. When reading the text, one can sense the tension and temperature rising with each accusation and response. Note my paraphrase of His opponents' verbal slings, all designed to discredit Him in the eyes of the public, and all of which were false:

- You are a braggart and a liar (verse 13).
- You talk about your "father." Where is he? (verse 19, making reference to the curious circumstances surrounding his birth).
- He is deranged. He's hinting at suicide (verse 22).
- Who do you think you are? (verse 25).
- *We're* God's chosen. *We're* free. Abraham is *our* father (verses 33 and 39, and note that this comment is a prelude to their accusation that Jesus wasn't really Jewish, but an interloping Samaritan).

- We aren't bastard children (verse 41, a not-so-veiled reference to Jesus' birth story).
- You're a filthy Samaritan, you suffer from mental illness, and you are probably a tool of Satan (verse 48).
- You're demon-possessed! Your words prove it! (verse 52).
- Your arrogance is saying you are greater than Abraham. Who do you make yourself out to be? (verse 53).

Notice that Jesus in this public debate did not turn the other cheek or "take a leave of absence" in order to allow for a thorough investigation to clear His name. That would have taken Him out the game entirely and probably forever because you can bet His enemies would file false charge after false charge just to keep Him permanently out of the arena. And, even if every charge were false, the court of public opinion is not only fickle but impressionable. His character would have been called into doubt and the mission would have been destroyed.

Rather than have that happen, Jesus answered every one of their barbs. He fought them with the truth. Paul, after all, in Ephesians 6 tells us to fight with the full armor of God, and the sole offensive weapon he gives us is the Word of God, which is the truth (Ephesians 6:8; 2 Timothy 2:15). He does not tell us to become a punching bag.

But Jesus really did tell us to "turn the other cheek." What is the wise but harmless way to do this?

Hopefully, we can see that this does not mean caving in. Jesus is really telling us not to allow personal insults to rattle us or cause us to retaliate in kind, thereby derailing our mission. When you turn the other cheek, you are not conceding a thing, nor are you backing down, nor are you giving up the fight.

Read John 8 and notice that Jesus never lost His cool when being personally insulted. He responded every time with His message and purpose. It takes an extreme level of psychological health, not to mention an overwhelming ability to offer grace, to refrain from defending one's ego and to stay the course for a greater cause.

That's why Jesus turned the other cheek when He was on trial for His life. He was not backing down. He was fulfilling his mission.