

Should We Turn the Other Cheek?

In Matthew's Gospel (Mt 5:38-41), Jesus tells His audience: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on [your] right cheek, turn the other one to him as well. If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand him your cloak as well. Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go with him for two miles."

Do these commands mandate pacifism, self-endangerment or renunciation of duty to defend the vulnerable? To understand what Jesus meant, we should examine the context of Jesus' comments.

During the first century A.D. there were several cultural behaviors associated with Jesus' comments that may be relevant. Many scholars have stated that Jesus was likely referring to the system of civil court practices at the time, which allowed personal affronts, personal infringements, and personal insults to be brought before a judge. The resulting judgements were turning family members against one another. To turn the other cheek in this case would mean to not seek damages for personal confrontations but to forgive and forget.

Other scholars, including Ghandi, thought Jesus' direction was a form of non-violent protest. Rather than resist Roman occupation with violence, offering the other cheek would be a challenge to the superiority of Roman officials who backhanded a non-Roman for being insubordinate. Rather than resorting to violence, a non-Roman who turned the other cheek would be inferring "I resist you for I am your equal".

Other scholars point out that in Jesus' time there was a law that a Roman soldier could require a non-Roman to carry his gear. Because of Roman soldiers abusing this privilege, the law was

changed to limit the Roman soldier's authority to one mile. A soldier who secured more than one mile of service would be subject to discipline. Therefore, Jesus in this case could be promoting another subtle and non-violent form of protest against an oppressive practice of an occupying army.

St. Augustine wrote on the subject of turning the other cheek, noting that it was a wise choice in avoiding the escalation of violence between confronting parties.

It would be difficult to determine which of the aforementioned scenarios Jesus may have been describing. Based on His practice of using parables that had multiple meanings, He could have been applying His command to all of the above scenarios.

Certainly when Jesus was slapped in John 18:23 He said: "If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong; but if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?" He did not turn the other cheek. Further, He did not exclude the appropriate use of force to bring about justice – as in Matthew 22:2-7.

When examining the totality of Jesus' teachings, it is certain that He consistently extolled gentleness, compassion and charity – remembering that there is no charity without justice.

It is also certain that Jesus did not advocate self-endangerment or renunciation of duty to defend the vulnerable. Instead, He considered the most vulnerable (children) to be the greatest of all: (Lk 9:46-48) "An argument arose among the disciples about which of them was the greatest. Jesus realized the intention of their hearts and took a child and placed it by his side and said to them, "Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me. For the one who is least among all of you is the one who is the greatest."

In summary, we must always be careful to examine Jesus' teachings in context, in light of scholarly examination and in comparison to Jesus' other teachings. And when a scripture passage can be interpreted in multiple ways, we should pray to the Holy Spirit for guidance and understanding.

References from New American Bible