

"What did Jesus mean when He instructed us to turn the other cheek?"

In Matthew 5:38–39, Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.” The concept of “turning the other cheek” is a difficult one for us to grasp. Allowing a second slap after being slapped once does not come naturally.

In the section of Jesus’ [Sermon on the Mount](#) in which He commands us to turn the other cheek, He addresses the need for true transformation, versus mere rule-keeping. It’s not enough to obey the letter of the law; we must conform to the spirit of the law as well.

Much of the material surrounding Jesus’ command to turn the other cheek complements the nature of His coming, which was characterized by mercy, sacrificial love, and longsuffering toward sinners. At the same time, Jesus affirms the “last is first” principle upon which the kingdom of God is based. For instance, He tells us to go the extra mile for someone who abuses us (Matthew 5:41) and to love and pray for our enemies instead of holding enmity against them (verse 44). In summary, Jesus is saying we need to be pure inside and out and as accommodating as possible for the sake of a lost world.

A word about the “slap” that Jesus says we should endure. Jesus here speaks of personal slights of any kind. The slap (or the “smiting,” as the KJV has it) does not have to involve literal, physical violence. Even in our day, a “slap in the face” is a metaphor for an unexpected insult or offense. Did someone insult you? Let him, Jesus says. Are you shocked and offended? Don’t be. And don’t return insult for insult. Turn the other cheek.

Matthew Henry’s comment on this verse is helpful: “Suffer any injury that can be borne, for the sake of peace, committing your concerns to the Lord’s keeping. And the sum of all is, that Christians must avoid disputing and striving. If any say, Flesh and blood cannot pass by such an affront, let them remember, that flesh and blood shall not inherit the kingdom of God; and those who act upon right principles will have most peace and comfort” (*Concise Commentary*, entry for Matthew 5:38).

Turning the other cheek does not imply pacifism, nor does it mean we place ourselves or others in danger. Jesus’ command to turn the other cheek is simply a command to forgo retaliation for personal offenses. He was not setting government foreign policy, and He was not throwing out the judicial system. Crimes can still be prosecuted, and wars can still be waged, but the follower of Christ need not defend his personal “rights” or [avenge](#) his honor.

There was a time in history when a man would feel compelled to protect his honor against one who slandered him or otherwise besmirched his character. The offended party would challenge the offender to a duel. Swords, firearms, or other weapons were chosen, and the two enemies

would face off. In most cases, senseless bloodshed ensued. Samuel Johnson wrote in favor of the practice of dueling: "A man may shoot the man who invades his character, as he may shoot him who attempts to break into his house." The problem is that "invasions of character" are exactly what Jesus told us to tolerate in Matthew 5:38. Turning the other cheek would have been a better option than dueling, and it would have saved lives.

Retaliation is what most people expect and how worldly people act. Turning the other cheek requires help from on high. Responding to hatred with love and ignoring personal slights display the supernatural power of the indwelling Holy Spirit and may afford the chance to share the gospel.

Jesus was, of course, the perfect example of turning the other cheek because He was silent before His accusers and did not call down revenge from heaven on those who crucified Him. Instead, He prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).