Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Should Christians Never Defend Themselves?
Scripture: Matthew 5:39
Code: BQ122611

“Whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also.” (Matthew 5:39)

As human beings we have the right to be treated with basic dignity, respect, and consideration. Because every person is created in His image, God demands that we treat one another with respect. But he knows that we will not always be so treated. Often for the very reason that we belong to God and go by the name of His Son, we will be mistreated, ridiculed, and held in contempt (see Matt. 10:16–23; John 15:18—16:3; 1 Pet. 2:20–21; 3:13–17; 4:12–19; cf. 2 Tim. 3:12). It is the way we react to mistreatment and insult that Jesus is talking about here.

Among Jews, a slap or other striking in the face was among the most demeaning and contemptuous of acts (cf. Matt. 26:67–68; Mark 14:65; John 18:22). To strike someone elsewhere on the body might cause more physical harm, but a slap in the face was an attack on one’s honor and was considered to be a terrible indignity. It was to be treated with disdain, as being less than a human. Even a slave would rather have been stuck across the back with a whip than be slapped in the face by his master’s hand.

To strike someone on the **right cheek** would then be a vicious angry reaction, indicating an act of insult. Yet when we are insulted, maligned, and treated with contempt-literally or figuratively struck on the cheek by someone-we are to **turn to him the other also**. But Jesus’ point pertains more to what we are not to do than what we are to do. Turning the other cheek symbolizes the nonavenging, nonretaliatory, humble, and gentle spirit that is to characterize kingdom citizens (cf. vv. 3, 5).

Jesus strongly resisted evil that was directed against others, especially His Father-as when He cleansed the Temple of those who defiled His Father’s house. But He did not resist by personal vengeance any evil directed at Himself. When the leaders of the Sanhedrin, and later the soldiers, physically abused Him and mocked Him, He did not retaliate either in words or in actions (Matt. 26:67–68). As Isaiah had predicted of Him, Christ gave His back to those who struck Him and His cheeks to those who plucked out His beard (Isa. 50:6). As Jesus hung from the cross, He prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Peter sums up our Lord’s example: “But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but

kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously” (1 Pet. 2:20–23).

When someone attacks our right to dignity, we too are not to defend that right by retaliation. We are to leave the protection and defense of our dignity in God’s hands, knowing that one day we will live and reign with him in His kingdom in great glory.

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