

The Hard Sayings of Jesus

Bible Study #3

“But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also.” -Matthew 5:39, NLT

REACTIONS TO THIS SAYING OF JESUS

READ CONTEXT: Matthew 5:38-42

COMMENTARY

This is a hard saying in the sense that it prescribes a course of action which does not come naturally to us. Unprovoked assault prompts resentment and retaliation. If one wants to be painfully literal, the assault is particularly vicious, for if the striker is right-handed, it is with the back of his hand that he hits the other on the right cheek.

This is one of a number of examples by which Jesus shows that the lifestyle of the kingdom of God is more demanding than what the law of Moses laid down. “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth’” (Mt 5:38). This was indeed laid down in Israel’s earliest law code (Ex 21:24), and when it was first said it marked a great step forward, for it imposed a strict limitation on the taking of vengeance. It replaced an earlier system of justice according to which if a member of tribe X injured a member of tribe Y, tribe Y was under an obligation to take vengeance on tribe X. This quickly led to a blood feud between the two tribes and resulted in suffering which far exceeded the original injury. But incorporated into Israel’s law code was the principle of exact retaliation: one eye, and no more, for an eye; one life, and no more, for a life. When wounded honor was satisfied with such precisely proportionate amends, life was much less fraught with hazards. The acceptance of this principle made it easier to regard monetary compensation as being, in many cases, a reasonable replacement for the infliction of an equal and opposite injury on the offending party.

But now Jesus takes a further step. “Don’t retaliate at all,” he says to his disciples. “Don’t harbor a spirit of resentment; if someone does you an injury or puts you to inconvenience, show yourself master of the situation by doing something to his advantage. If he gets some pleasure out of hitting you, let him hit you again.” (It should not be necessary to say that this saying is no more to be pressed literally than the saying about plucking out one’s right eye and throwing it away—it is not difficult to envisage the other cheek being turned in a very provocative manner.) If a soldier or other government official conscripts your services to carry a load for him so far, you are under compulsion; you are forced to do it. But, when you have reached the end of the stipulated distance, you are a free person again; then you can say to him, “If you’d like it carried farther, I will gladly carry it for you.” The initiative has now become yours, and you can take it not by voicing a sense of grievance at having been put to

such inconvenience but by performing an act of grace. This way of reacting to violence and compulsion is the way of Christ.¹

QUESTIONS

1. This seems like an unfair request. If someone hurts you, shouldn't we hurt them back? Otherwise, they might hurt us again.
2. Jesus speaks of the sins of retaliation. How does hurting someone who hurt you continue retaliation? Look at the Middle East this week, Hamas attacked Israel, Israel responded with more attacks, Lebanon and Hezbollah attacks Israel, Israel attacks and kills their leaders and then sends in ground forces, Lebanon responds by sending missiles into Tel Aviv threatening more violence if Israel shoots missiles into Lebanon and around and around it goes. When is retaliation ever settled? How does Jesus talk about retaliation?
3. If we're to spiritualize this text, how might we do that? Surely this doesn't apply to every situation. When would it apply and when would it not apply?
4. Here are some examples of spiritualizing the text. Comment as you feel appropriate:
 - Jesus was setting forth a set of values to which his disciples should aspire. They are impossible but that's the point. By striving toward them, we live better than we would otherwise.
 - Jesus' words throughout the Sermon on the Mount reveal the impossibility of human righteousness, preparing us for the advent of grace.
 - Jesus was speaking to his disciples as individuals. In our modern world, with its complex relationships, global economics, and violent military threats, his advice does not hold.
 - Jesus offers pragmatic advice to empower oppressed people. When you cannot force people to treat you justly, you can expose the injustice of the situation. When striking back will only hurt you, confront the aggressor without retaliating. When your debts are out of control, show how poverty leaves you without protection from the elements. When your occupier demands your labor, put him in an impossible situation by exceeding conventional expectations.

Though clever and insightful, all of these interpretations suffer from the same problem. Matthew's Gospel as a whole, and the Sermon on the Mount in particular, repeatedly insist that Jesus means exactly what he says. In Matthew's Gospel, to follow Jesus means to do what he says.²

¹ Walter C. Kaiser Jr. et al., *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 362–363.

² Greg Carey, "[Exegetical Perspective on Matthew 5:38–48](#)," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 381–383.

Does Jesus mean what he says? Or is there wiggle room?

5. Jason Bayassee tells of how some people have spiritualized this text so that it isn't as applicable as one might think. He writes: Because Jesus is asking us to do what feels like an impossible task, "it is no wonder Christians have developed elaborate strategies for avoiding these commands, impossible and offensive as they are. Some historians tell us that Jesus' admonition to turn the other cheek is buried in historical *obscurata*: it was an offensive gesture to Jews in the ancient world to be slapped with the back of the right hand. Turning the other cheek makes it impossible to be so slapped again. Suddenly the command seems historically distant and irrelevant to us. If you bind the hands of the text that way, sit back and listen for the congregation to exhale: "Whew, I was hoping Jesus didn't mean it." How can we rub the edges off the command to lend to everyone who asks? To love enemies? To be perfect? Here is how Christians have done it: These are spiritual admonitions, directed at our souls, not at the outward manifestations of our bodies, which may have to hoard stuff, bomb our enemies, and settle for being spiritual slackers."³ Do you agree with his statement, or is his response more tongue-in-cheek? Explain your answer.
6. I read about someone who had a friend that grew up with missionary parents in a favela in Brazil. Asked how her family could live among the poorest of the world's poor without danger of being robbed, she said, "Simple. You can't own anything anyone would want to steal." Lend to anyone who asks, give to all who want to borrow. Then you can live among God's poor and receive the blessing of possessing nothing. For Jesus, God incarnate, possesses nothing, except our hearts. Is there an inherent danger of owning too much stuff or hoarding it? How would that make Jesus' words more difficult?
7. Bayassee warns us that another potential mistake in interpreting this passage is to minimize its difficulty, for example, by romanticizing one's enemies or downplaying the difficulty of nonretaliation. The Bible was written by and for people under savage persecution. Scripture holds up well when read by powerless people under the thumb of an empire as mighty as Rome's. We think our "enemy" is the parishioner badgering us with critical e-mails. Think instead of a soldier with the power of life or death over you commandeering your labor, and your offering to do twice what he asks. For another modern parallel, think of the insurance companies asking ever more of our income to insure ever fewer of us. This text would say, they want how much? Give them more. God makes us enemies into divine friends, makes orphans

³ Jason Bayassee, "[Theological Perspective on Matthew 5:38–48.](#)" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 380–382.

into daughters and sons (v. 45) in God’s incarnation and crucifixion. God gives to us extravagantly, even nonsensically. How can we do otherwise?⁴

8. How might this sound like to African Americans who are still suffering the vestiges of slavery and race discrimination, Japanese nationals and Japanese Americans who live with the tattooed numbers of the internment from World War II; survivors of the Holocaust; Hispanic Americans who are discriminated against with “English Only” requirements; women who make less money than men doing the same job; and those around the globe who suffer at the hands of oppressors. Jesus’ call to forgive and be reconciled rings hollow and seems resigned to evil.⁵ How should these folks let discrimination continue? Where is the justice if we continue to abusers abuse others?
9. Jesus recommends a way of discipleship that ostensibly does not resist an aggressor, but in so doing actually does resist the underlying paradigm of hostility and contempt involved in striking a cheek, suing for a coat, or forcing someone to walk a mile in the first place. The nonviolent resistance movements associated with such figures as Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. are consonant with this basic subversive pattern in various respects. In the end, Jesus’ instruction, “Do not resist an evildoer,” points toward a deeper, more radical resistance: namely, non-cooperation in the underlying paradigm of hate and brutality involved in evildoing. In fact, we may say that for Jesus, true resistance to evil entails active, creative nonresistance to the evildoer.

All this is summed up in verse 44: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” In the face of the most extreme opponents (“enemies”) and acts of opposition (“persecution”), Jesus advises defiance—but not defiance directed against the enemies themselves, since this simply perpetuates and intensifies the relationship’s adversarial character, but rather a deeper defiance directed against the vicious, endless cycle of enemy making. Do not fight fire with fire, Jesus says; rather, fight fire with water, and thereby refuse to take part in the incendiary, all too-familiar work of injury and domination.⁶

CLOSING THOUGHTS

CLOSING PRAYER

⁴ Ibid. 384.

⁵ Barbara J. Essex, [“Pastoral Perspective on Matthew 5:38–48,”](#) in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 380–382.

⁶ Matthew Myer Boulton, [“Homiletical Perspective on Matthew 5:38–48,”](#) in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 383–385.