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Turn-the-Other-Cheek_Interpretations

Interpretations

This phrase, as with much of the Sermon on the Mount, has been subjected to both literal and figurative interpretations.

Nonresistance literal interpretation

This passage has been interpreted by some as a literal injunction that if a person has been slapped in the face by another as an insult or provocation to a quarrel, one ought not to respond by hitting back or otherwise responding hurtfully. Rather, he ought to move in the other direction, presenting the other cheek (the one that has not been slapped yet) and offer to let that cheek also be slapped.

While literalist supporters argue there is a truly radical breakthrough contained in this teaching that can only be appreciated by understanding it literally, the shocking and often considered foolish import of the passage has spawned many non-literal interpretations and justifications. Jewish commentator Joseph Telushkin has noted that "every nation with a large Christian population has at times chosen to disregard or reinterpret Jesus' words [about turning the other cheek]." One justification argues that the reason for turning the other cheek is the hope that the other person's conscience would be pricked and he would not slap the other cheek, thus preventing a quarrel from really getting started.

Another variation of this interpretation can be further clarified by Paul in Romans 12:19.

"Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord." (Romans 12:19, NIV)
Here the point isn't that the criminal goes unpunished forever, but that the victim places the punishment of the perpetrator in God's hands. The logic is that only God can punish justly, whereas mankind in their sin and fallibility can not.

Historical, figurative interpretation

Those interpreting this passage figuratively have cited historical and other factors in support.

(1) They note that at the time of Jesus, striking someone deemed to be of a lower class with the back of the hand was used to assert authority and dominance.

(2) If the persecuted person "turned the other cheek," the discipliner was faced with a dilemma. * The left hand was used for unclean purposes, so a back-hand strike on the

opposite cheek would not be performed. * The other alternative would be to punch the person, but this was seen as a statement of equality. * Thus, they argue, by turning the other cheek the persecuted (man) was in effect demanding equality.

(3) Further, it is argued, by handing over one's cloak in addition to one's tunic, the debtor has essentially given the shirt off their back, a situation directly forbidden by Jewish Law as stated in Deuteronomy 24: 10-13:

*** "When you make your neighbor a loan of any sort, you shall not enter his house to take his pledge. You shall remain outside, and the man to whom you make the loan shall bring the pledge out to you. If he is a poor man, you shall not sleep with his pledge. When the sun goes down you shall surely return the pledge to him, that he may sleep in his cloak and bless you; and it will be righteousness for you before the LORD your God."
*** By giving the lender the cloak as well the debtor was reduced to nakedness.

Public nudity was viewed as bringing shame on the viewer, not the naked, as evidenced in Genesis 9: 20-27:

(example) "Noah was the first tiller of the soil. He planted a vineyard; and he drank of the wine, and became drunk, and lay uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it upon both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness."

Promoters of this nonviolent interpretation further argue that the succeeding verse from the Sermon on the Mount can similarly be seen as a method for making the oppressor break the law: commonly invoked Roman law allowed a Roman soldier to demand that citizens of occupied territories carry the soldier's military gear for one mile, but prohibited the soldier from forcing an individual to go further than one mile, at the risk of suffering disciplinary actions. In this example, the nonviolent interpretation sees Jesus as placing criticism on an unjust and hated Roman law as well as clarifying the teaching to extend beyond Jewish law.

Righteous personal conduct interpretation

There is a third school of thought in regards to this passage. Jesus was not changing the meaning of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" but restoring it to the original context. Jesus starts his statement with "you have heard it said" which means that he was clarifying a misconception, as opposed to "it is written" which would be a reference to scripture. The common misconception seems to be that people were using Exodus 21:24-25 (the guidelines for a magistrate to punish convicted offenders) as a justification for personal vengeance. In this context, the command to "turn the other cheek" would not be a command to allow someone to beat or rob a person, but a command not to take vengeance.

Some point out that Jesus said "he who has no sword, let him sell his garment and buy one" from Luke 22:36 and the Old Testament laws regarding killing in self-defense to support this view. However, even Luke 22:36 could have been figurative as in Luke 22:38 the disciples point out that they have two swords among the twelve of them, to which Jesus replies "That is enough." If Jesus meant his statement to be taken literally then twelve swords would have been required, not two.

Criticism

Many Christians and non-Christians who interpret the passage literally have criticised this teaching as unworkable in practice, and potentially immoral, as it rewards those who commit acts of violence, without countering them with self-defense or acts of justice.

Advocates for nonresistance insist such criticisms of immorality fail to see the potential power of good responding to evil.

Advocates of nonviolence maintain that the teaching actually does support self-defense, and in fact puts forth multiple examples of nonviolent methods for defending one's dignity.