

## Turn the other cheek

Jesus didn't mean that we can't duck. But knowing full well that His disciples would at times be abused, taken advantage of, mistreated, overlooked, put-down and presumed upon, He wanted to assure them that personal mistreatment by others was no big deal. Their Father God would be more than sufficient for them in their time of need (though, of course, such things would still hurt).

Probably no teaching of Jesus, except perhaps the Golden Rule, has been so widely remembered as "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." (Mt 5:38) And like the Golden Rule, this teaching too, while remembered, has been widely ignored. It seems so un-American!

It actually takes someone with great strength, literally divine strength, to overlook insult and injury from others—and even more than that, to calmly remain in place, quietly serving Jesus. This does not mean that one cannot defend himself. Scripture records that Jesus defended Himself verbally on many occasions, and physically removed Himself from being thrown off a cliff on one occasion, and from stoning another time. But when He knew that it was God's will for Him to remain in place and accept the suffering, He did so.

This teaching of Jesus has nothing to do with protecting yourself or your family from bodily harm, or whether His disciples can serve in the military. Instead, Jesus Christ is teaching the kingdom response to the ordinary, daily meanness and unpleasantness we all experience. The rude drivers, the gas station charging outrageous prices the Friday night before Hurricane Ike, the inconsiderate or insulting words spoken in a family, unfairness from our boss at work. There are plenty of people who live poised to respond to the slightest provocation or insult from others. You and I know some of them. People who live by the standard, "I ain't gonna take no crap from nobody!" Jesus doesn't want us to be like that. How happy are those people? How peaceful? How able are they to love God and others? Are they not instead just simmering pots of tension, waiting to boil over?

Because Jesus was certain that in His kingdom, God justifies His people, God defends His people, and that God holds wrongdoers to account, Jesus was able to insist to His followers that they should not waste their energy trying to straighten out those whose behavior was provocative. "Ye



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have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say unto you, resist not him that is evil. But whosoever smiteth thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man would go to law with thee and take away thy coat, let him have they cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee, turn not thou away." (Mt 5:38-42)

This is not a new set of legalisms. This is not Law to be followed in every case of mistreatment. Love, in fact, may require in some situations that we confront those who mistreat us. This is instead a simple, but memorable description of what in fact will be the case for those who grow deeply in the kingdom. We will become the sort of people who are relatively untroubled by the misbehavior of others towards us—and in fact, will find ourselves PREFERRING to forgive them, bear with them, and even love them, rather than exhaust ourselves and ruin our own inward calm and worship of God through anger, fear, and bitterness by trying to "straighten them out." Instead we entrust them to God. We may even grow to the point where our heart aches because of the ruin of their souls. We find ourselves really wanting "mercy to triumph over judgment." This is a major teaching of Jesus and He brings it into play throughout His Sermon on the Mount.

But why should we not respond to the unpleasant behavior of others? Because by faith we know we are NOW in God's kingdom, surrounded by the immediate presence of God, Father, Son and Spirit, the holy angels, as well as the spirits of "just men made perfect." We are a people who belong to God—who are heaven-bound—who are heirs of this world with Jesus Christ. And by faith we get to act like it.

The man stood quietly praying, waiting for her to finish. His wife continued to rage, ordering him to straighten out his children. She was their stepmother, but had long ago forfeited their respect by her inconsistency and meanness. The man knew he was going to obey God and not react harshly with his children. She accusingly insisted that if he loved her, he would jerk a knot in those kids for the way they had behaved towards her. He assured her that he did love her, that he would talk with the children, but that he was not going to mistreat them. She began calling him names. He remained standing.

The woman knew she had to keep her job. It was the only way she could provide for her children, ever since her husband died. Her boss was often unreasonable, demanding that she stay late if something came up at the last minute, which often happened because he was a poor planner. Yet after work, she had to pick up her children from her mother and start her evening routine of supper, homework, and housework. She didn't mind staying a few minutes late, every once in a while. But his insistence that she stay late had now become routine. This time she prayed, and calmly but firmly said, "I have other things I must do. I will be glad to help first thing in the morning, but now I must go." She ignored his angry glare and walked out.

What can give us the internal poise such that we do not overly react to the provocations of others? Or, as Jesus taught, to even go a second mile with such people? Well, I'm not there yet. But in the history of the Church, there have been many who did get there. They became solid, immovable, and full of the peace of God. How? Through daily identification with Jesus. They died to themselves and saw their life as ONLY one of obedience to Jesus Christ. Every little thing they learned to do unto Jesus, giving thanks to God through Him. Every little thing. Today. Tomorrow. The next day. And the day after that. At times they stumbled and fell. Sometimes they forgot. But they always got back up and kept going. Doing every little thing unto Jesus.

This is where I too want to go. How about you?

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