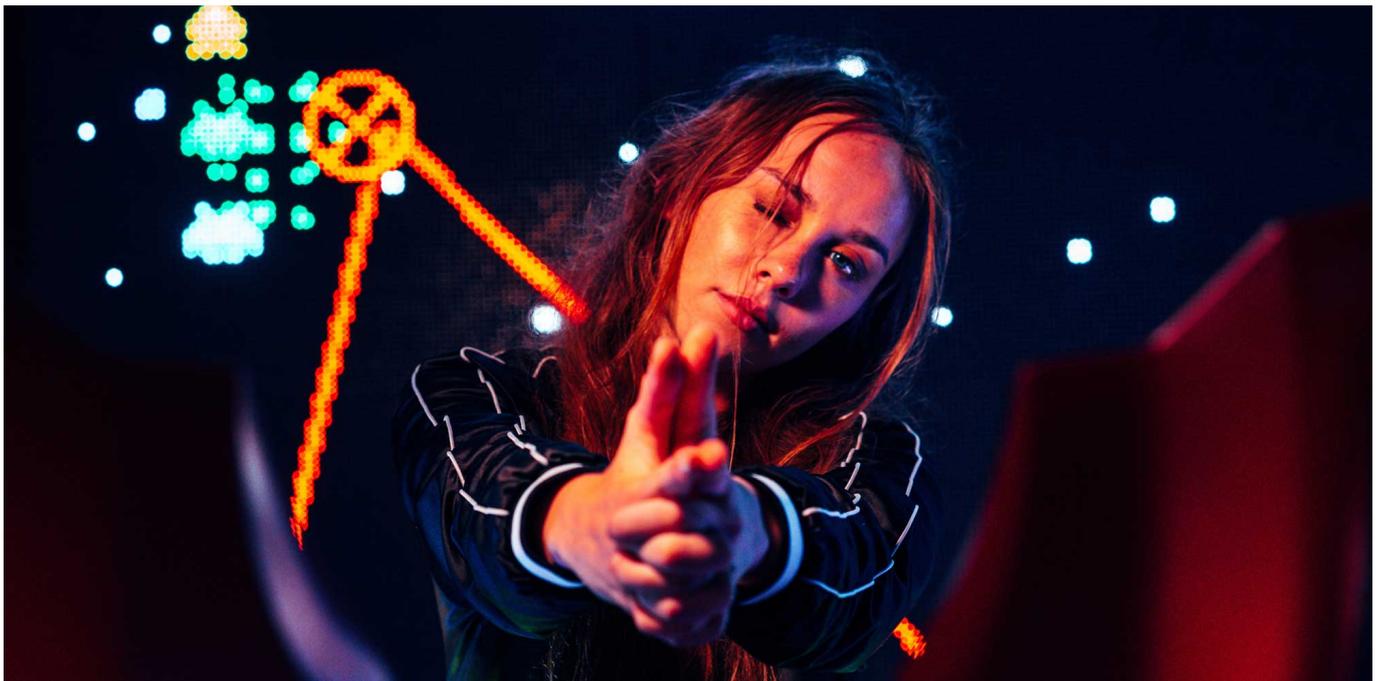


Because Jesus Said, “Turn The Other Cheek,” Is Self-Defense Wrong?

Ben Giselbach
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Jesus is the “prince of peace” (Isa. 9:6). But *peace* is not to be confused with *pacifism*^[1]. In fact, the purpose of Jesus’ earthly ministry was not to bring peace or pacifism, but to save souls from hell (Luke 19:10) and to reconcile them with God (2 Cor. 5:18-19). This is why He said, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace on the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matt. 10:34). Indeed, Christianity produces opposition and sometimes violence from others. Why? Because Jesus is “*the light of the world*” (John 8:12), and all who are evil “*hate the light*” (John 3:2). Jesus’ primary goal is not temporal world peace, but peace with God and His children (Rom. 5:1; 1 John 1:7).

People frequently argue that it is wrong for Christians to exercise self-defense by referencing Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:38-42:

³⁸ “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps

you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.⁴⁰ And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.⁴¹ And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.⁴² Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

However, to argue that it is wrong to defend yourself and others - even when it involves lethal force - is an abuse of this text and actually *cheapens* Christ's words.

The Context Of Matthew 5:38-42

It is critically important to remember the context of these words in Jesus' "sermon on the mount." The quote "*an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*" was part of the Law of Moses (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21). This was good because it restricted the victim from inflicting more punishment than was due. It also kept vigilantes from exercising what they perceived as "justice," since punishment was to be determined by a judicial system (cf. Lev. 19:15-21; Prov. 20:22; 24:29). Additionally, it required the punishment to fit the crime.

Yet over time, the oral tradition of the Jewish rabbis perverted the spirit of the Law. By the time of Jesus' ministry, the Jewish leaders had taken what God had legislated for good and twisted it into something evil. They were using this law of retribution *vindictively*. People were using this law to *retaliate* against their enemies. Jesus came to restore the spirit of the Law and commence an age of greater holiness.

Jesus in this text is not establishing a new system of justice for government or for those in positions of authority. Instead of seeking revenge, Jesus, in His last will and testament, wanted His disciples to "*overcome evil with good*" (Rom. 12:21). We must never forget that vengeance ultimately belongs to God (Rom. 12:19; Heb. 10:30; Prov. 24:29).

Christians Are To Pursue A Meek & Humble Spirit

Jesus is not speaking in terms of physical assault in Matthew 5:38-42, wherein one's life or safety is jeopardized. Otherwise He would have used a different example than a mere smack on the cheek. **Rather, Jesus is talking about insult and slander.**

Since most people are right-handed, how does one slap you on your right cheek if they are standing in front of you? What we find in verse 39 is imagery of someone hitting your right cheek with the back of their hand, which was an ancient insult (cf. Job 16:10;

Lam. 3:30; Matt. 26:67; John 18:22; 2 Cor. 11:20). A slap on the face was demeaning and dishonoring (Crain 183).

If Jesus' words are to be taken literally, are we free to retaliate after we have turned and our second cheek has been struck? Obviously, our responsibility goes beyond a mere strike on the cheek and into the realm of personal insult. When we limit Jesus' words to literal interpretation, we are in fact cheapening the profound teachings of Christ.

The point is this: when someone insults you, do not respond by insulting in return. The same is true for lawsuits for the purpose of selfish gain (v. 40), requests that are inconvenient to carry out (v. 41), and property rights when others have proper need (v. 42).

When we respond to hatred with love, we might be afforded the chance to be the "salt and light" of the world (Matt. 5:13-16). When we act in ways that are unnatural to society, we are demonstrating the glorious power of Christ in our lives (Gal. 2:20).

Jesus, in Matthew 5:38-42, was simply not talking about self-defense. Albert Barnes wrote,

Christ did not intend to teach that we are to see our families murdered, or be murdered ourselves, rather than to make resistance. The law of nature, and all laws, human and divine, justify self-defense when life is in danger. It cannot surely be the intention to teach that a father should sit by coolly and see his family butchered by savages, and not be allowed to defend them. [...] Our Savior immediately explains what He means by it. (59)

Self-Defense Is A Good Thing

Defending self or others is justified, even if it involves lethal force. There is "*a time to kill*," "*a time to speak*," and "*a time for war*" (Ecc. 3:1-8). Jesus at one point told his disciples to carry swords (Luke 22:35-38). The sword was the instrument of death, much like a firearm is today. He knew when He sent His disciples out, they would be traveling through dangerous territory.

Later, when the guards came to arrest Jesus, Peter had his sword with Him. Jesus didn't say, "*Why do you have a sword?!*" He said "*No more of this!*" (Luke 22:49-51). The implication is that the sword had an appropriate place in a physical arena, but has no business in

contending for the Kingdom of Heaven. Additionally, there is not a single instance in the Bible wherein men who regularly carry weapons are told to repent by removing them (cf. Luke 3:14; Acts 10:1-8, 44-48; 16:25-34).

It is also the responsibility of the righteous to protect the innocent. Psalm 82:4 says to *“rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”* Should we stand idle while someone we know is being assaulted? By doing so am I treating others as I would want them to treat me (Matt. 7:12)? Additionally, men have the responsibility to provide for their families (1 Tim. 5:8). Are we to limit this command to merely providing food and shelter, and argue that this does not also imply a man should protect his family from rapists and murderers?

Conclusion

It is wrong to twist Jesus’ words to say something He did not say. Whether we are studying Matthew 5:38-42 or another passage, we must always remember the context of what read. God’s Word permits man to defend himself and those around him. Yet this does not negate the serious responsibility people have when they choose to carry a firearm or another method of self-defense.

Sources

Barnes, Albert. Notes on the New Testament: Matthew and Mark. 1832 Reprint. Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1974.

Crain, Sellers Jr. Truth For Today Commentary: Matthew 1-13. Resource Publications: Benton, Arkansas, n.d.

[1] Pacifism: (noun): opposition to war or violence as a means of settling disputes; specifically: refusal to bear arms on moral or religious grounds. “Pacifism.” Merriam-Webster.com. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 23 May 2014. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pacifism>>.