Jesus,

what do you mean?

***“If anyone slaps you on the right cheek,***

***turn to him the other also.”***

Or, “Have we no rights?”

Matthew 5:38-42

The Words:

Surely this is one of the more often quoted and most often abused sayings of Jesus. If we take the words literally, it seems like He is commanding passivity and pacifism. But what is the context of this saying? Answering that question will give us important clues to what Jesus meant, for He is not contradicting the Law of Moses as many imagine, but sharpening it, clarifying it, and modeling its fulfillment.

The Challenge:

On the other hand, which of Jesus’ sayings is more counter-intuitive? We naturally defend ourselves, and in fact, if anything comes at our face, we instinctively turn away or throw up our hands. And what of our commitment to our family, our nation, indeed law and order among humankind? Even if we can courageously do what Jesus says, how and where do we apply the principle?

The Principle: Relationships demand grace, not strict justice.

1. Disciples must be guided by loving grace, not primal law. vv. 38, 39a

Jesus is putting “The Law” in its proper context. The law which punishes violent crime (law of retribution, Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:19, 20; Deuteronomy 19:19) is not to govern daily life. So although armies and the state must demand justice (Romans 13:1-7), that principle must not rule interpersonal relationships. 1 Peter 4:8; Proverbs 10:12. This can happen only when we realize, as believers, we have nothing to lose.

2. Disciples seek to serve others, not their own rights. vv. 39b-42

We serve by not returning insults. v. 39b

We serve by not fighting over “things.” v. 40

We serve by bearing inconvenience graciously. v. 41

We serve by not hoarding our “stuff.” v. 42

The Application: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” Matthew 9:13

1. Turning the other cheek is not an endorsement of passivism.

The Bible is clear that not only is “the sword” a necessity in this world (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13, 14), but also that those engaged in keeping the peace can share in God’s blessings. Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 3:7, 14; Acts 10; etc. Likewise, we have a duty to defend others, including our families, from harm.

2. Turning the other cheek is a token of Kingdom grace.

Like loving our enemies, leaving our anger behind, and forgiving others, turning the other cheek is a reflection of our knowing God and His life within us. Matt. 5:43-45; Eph. 5:1, 2. We know we are His disciples because we love one another. John 13:35