

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 3/5/2021



Dear Friends in Christ,

Sometimes the things Jesus says are hard. Sometimes they are hard because they push us to behaviors that are outside our comfort zone. Sometimes they just don't seem to apply to today. Sometimes they are hard because what He is saying doesn't seem to make sense. And the difficulty comes because sometimes we can't hear how He is saying it—the tone and inflection of His voice—or see to whom He is saying it. And sometimes we don't know the historical context into which He is speaking. All these things challenge how we hear and consider responding to Jesus.

For example, does Jesus want us to continue to be mistreated if we are attacked and/or in an abusive situation? After all, He said, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also" (Matthew 5:39). How can this help the abused spouse? How can this help the person who is being bullied? Believe it or not, Jesus was speaking to help empower those who were powerless in His culture. Understanding the context can make a world of difference.

In Jesus' day, it was legal for a master to strike a servant or slave. A master could treat the one they "owned" any way s/he wanted. And a person could never respond by striking back at a person of higher societal rank. There were serious

consequences for such action. Further, the left hand was never used for hitting, and only the back of the right hand was used. To strike someone with the palm would indicate that they were equal to you, but a backhanded slap showed superior stature by the striker. If the one being hit cowered in submission, this allowed the abuser to repeat the gesture.

Jesus suggested a significant way to challenge the attacker. If you are being struck by someone with the back of their right hand, you are being struck on the right cheek causing your head to be turned with the right cheek continuing to be exposed. But if you quickly turn back so the left cheek is exposed, several things happen. First, again, no strike would be made with left hand to the left cheek—culturally it just was not done. Second, to hit your left cheek would necessitate using the palm of the striker's hand, raising you to the level of an equal—that isn't going to happen. Third, if the abuser uses the back of their right hand, they will have to strike you in the center of your face, the nose. Noses are much more sensitive than the cheek and bleed easily. To draw blood was also forbidden, so there would be great risk in a backhanded strike to the face. Turning your left cheek to the striker forces that person to stop—without having resorted to any kind of violent response.

Of course, we live in a different culture where such restrictions aren't in place. And assuredly, Jesus doesn't want us to be abused. So, there can and will be times when we need to protect ourselves from attack. Still, Jesus is offering to us a Kingdom way of responding when challenged aggressively. Martin Luther King, Jr. would walk through the crowd before a civil rights march. If there was anyone he suspected might react with violence, he would raise his hand as if to strike them. If the person showed any kind of aggressive response, Dr. King would instruct him/her to stay behind and pray for the marchers and for a greater sense of peace that would allow active participation in future marches.

Jesus calls us to respond to violence in nonviolent ways whenever we can. Peaceful response can diffuse violence and bring calm to situations. And it can challenge those who are physically or verbally aggressive to reevaluate their behavior, hopefully leading to more opportunities for civil discussion and greater understanding.

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey