

The Ethics of Non-Retaliation

A Literal, Historical, Grammatical, and Dispensational Analysis of Two
Biblical Idioms

Abstract

This paper examines two prominent biblical idioms—“turn the other cheek” (Matt. 5:39) and “heap coals of fire upon their heads” (Prov. 25:21-22; Rom. 12:20)—utilizing a literal, historical, grammatical, and dispensational hermeneutic. By analyzing lexical nuances, ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman cultural backgrounds, and transitions between biblical dispensations, this study demonstrates that these commands do not mandate passive victimization. Instead, they advocate for a proactive, non-retaliatory ethic that restores dignity to the exploited and entrusts ultimate justice to divine authority.

1 Introduction

Interpreting biblical idioms requires a rigorous hermeneutical framework to avoid anachronistic or woodenly literal misapplications. The literal, historical, grammatical, and dispensational method anchors the text in its original context. The literal sense acknowledges the functional reality of figures of speech; the grammatical and historical elements analyze syntax and cultural backdrop; and the dispensational element defines the specific theological era governing the text’s application.

2 The Dynamics of Honor and Assault: “Turn the Other Cheek”

Found in Matthew 5:39 and Luke 6:29, the command to “turn the other cheek” is frequently misunderstood as a mandate for absolute pacifism. However, lexical and historical evidence refutes this.

2.1 Lexical and Legal Context

The Greek verb *rhapizō* (to strike or slap) in Matthew 5:39 refers not to a lethal punch, but to a degrading slap. In the cultural context of first-century Judea, a strike on the “right cheek” necessitated a backhanded slap from a right-handed aggressor. According to the Mishnah (Tractate *Baba Kamma* 8:6), a backhanded slap carried a penalty of 400 *zuz*—double the standard fine—because it was considered a severe attack on personal honor rather than mere physical injury.

2.2 Stoicism vs. Biblical Agency

During the Greco-Roman period, philosophers like Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus championed the Stoic ideal of *apatheia*—an internal detachment that rendered a person unaffected by the insults of others. While Stoicism sought an undisturbed mind, the biblical ethic demanded proactive vulnerability. To offer the left cheek is an active surrender of the right to retaliation. For those facing extreme power imbalances or systemic exploitation, this act functions as “moral judo.” It allows the victim to assert inherent dignity and agency, refusing to be defined by the degradation imposed by the aggressor.

2.3 Dispensational Application

In classical dispensationalism (as noted by scholars like Charles Ryrie and Thomas Constable), the Sermon on the Mount presents the ethics of the Messianic Kingdom. While the physical kingdom is postponed, the spiritual principle of non-retaliation applies strictly to interpersonal relationships within the Church Age, not to civil justice or self-defense.

3 Radical Generosity: “Heap Coals of Fire”

Proverbs 25:21-22 and Romans 12:20 instruct believers to feed a hungry enemy, thereby “heaping coals of fire on his head.”

3.1 Historical and Theological Background

The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (TWOT) notes that the Hebrew word *gechalim* (coals) often pertains to domestic provision. In the ancient world, giving a neighbor live coals for their hearth was an act of life-sustaining generosity. Furthermore, archaeological evidence points to ancient Egyptian rituals where penitents carried braziers of burning coals on their heads as a public display of contrition.

3.2 The Purpose of the Coals

The grammatical structure links the “heaping of coals” directly to the acts of feeding and giving drink. Thus, the coals represent the burning shame and acute cognitive dissonance an enemy experiences when expecting retaliation but receiving grace. The Apostle Paul carries this Old Testament principle into the Dispensation of Grace (Rom. 12). By stepping aside and relying on divine justice, the believer creates an environment conducive to the enemy’s repentance.

4 Conclusion

Through the lens of this interpretative methodology, these idioms are rescued from passive interpretations. They are profound strategies for navigating honor, shame, and interpersonal conflict, offering a robust framework for overcoming hostility with grace.

References

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