

“Turn the Other Cheek”

Isn't About Forgiveness

Introduction

Turning the other cheek is not about forgiveness. The Greek word translated as "cheek" is *σιαγών* (*siagōn*), meaning jawbone, the same anatomical region that gnashes in outer darkness in Matthew 25. This walks through Matthew 5:39, word by word, in the original Greek. Four words restructure the entire verse.

1. Σιαγών (*siagōn*) is a jawbone, not a soft cheek.
2. Ανθίστημι (*anthistāmi*, translated as “resist”) is a military term for two armies facing off.
3. Πονηρός (*ponāros*, meaning “evil, wicked”), from a root meaning toil and burden. And
4. Στρέφω (*strophō*, translated as “turn”) never means endure or absorb anywhere in the Greek text.

After this, the verse shifts from sounding like a rule about absorbing insults to an instruction for what to do when the reactive will is triggered. *Siagōn* appears twice, in Matthew 5:39 and Luke 6:29. Thayer's defines it first as the jaw or jawbone, with cheek listed as the implied extension. The Septuagint uses *siagōn* to translate the Hebrew word *יָחִי* (*lehi*), the same word used in Judges 15:15 for the jawbone Samson wields as a weapon, in 1 Kings 22:24 when Zedekiah strikes Micaiah, and in Job 16:10. The strike verb is *ῥαπίζω* (*rhapizō*), an open-palm slap of insult, not a fist. The Mishnah assigned a compensatory fine of 200 zuz for a palm slap and 400 for a backhand. For the right cheek, with a right-handed striker, a backhand is required, the humiliation blow. The word translated “resist” is *anthistemi*, a compound of *anti* (against) and *histemi* (to stand), used in the Septuagint and by Josephus to denote two armies locked in military opposition. James 4:7 and Ephesians 6:13 command the same verb against spiritual patterns. The object determines the response. The word translated as "evil" is *ponāros*, from *πονός* (*ponos*), "toil" and "pain". Hesiod called Hercules *πονηρότατος καὶ ἄριστος* (*ponārotatos kai aristos*), most toilsome and best. In this reading, *τῷ πονηρῷ* (*tō ponerō*) corresponds not to an external villain but to the burdened reactive state. The word translated “turn” is *strophō*, to twist, turn round, change direction, execute an about-face. It never means endure anywhere in any Greek text. Jesus had *ὑπομένω* (*hypomenō*, to endure), and *ἀνέχομαι* (*anechomai*, to tolerate) available but chose neither. Matthew 18:3 uses the same verb *strophō* for the complete reorientation required to enter the kingdom. The jawbone that gnashes in Matthew 25:30 and the jawbone that turns in Matthew 5:39 are the same bone with two outcomes. In this reading, the verse maps to a single decisive turn of the clenched will away from locked opposition toward open awareness.

An Examination of the Text

The word your Bible translates as "cheek" in this verse is the Greek word for jawbone. The very same bone that clenches when teeth gnash in outer darkness. The traditional reading of Matthew 5:39 as a teaching on compassion and nonviolence is not wrong. It has guided genuine kindness for centuries. But the Greek beneath it carries a meaning the English cannot preserve. If the cheek is actually a jawbone, what does "turn" mean?

The Greek word Jesus chose has never meant "endure" or "absorb" in any text ever written. The word translated as "evil" refers to the person you were taught to forgive. That word comes from a Greek root that no one in your church ever mentioned. Four Greek words in one verse. All are checkable on a free interlinear site in thirty seconds: a jawbone, a military term, a redirection command, and a word that was never about a villain.

You know this verse. You have heard it read in church, quoted in arguments, and thrown at you when someone wanted you to be quiet and take it. "Turn the other cheek." You were taught that it means absorbing the blow, forgiving the attacker, not fighting back, and being the bigger person. Just let it go. And perhaps you have tried. Maybe you sat in a pew and heard a pastor say this verse proves that Christians should never be angry. But something in you twisted because you were angry. The verse felt like it was calling you a failure for feeling what you felt.

That reading starts in the verse before it. Matthew 5:38 says, "You have heard that it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." That was "lex talionis," a Latin term meaning "law of retaliation." It is the legal and moral principle that a punishment should correspond in degree and kind to the offense of the wrongdoer. It's a legal principle given to courts to limit vengeance, not a permission slip for revenge. It was a rule of proportionality. You do not get to burn down a village just because someone stole a goat. You cannot escalate beyond what was done to you. The law was a restraint, not a weapon.

Then Jesus says, "But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." That is the verse as you received it, as a rule of forgiveness and a command to be passive. But the word your English Bible translates as "cheek" is *siagōn*. When you look it up in any free interlinear, the primary definition is not "cheek"; it is jawbone. So, the cheek is a jawbone.

And that raises a question the English never lets you ask. If this is a jawbone, why does the verse specify the right one? And why does it matter that the strike is an open-hand slap, not a fist? The word *siagōn* appears only twice in the entire New Testament: here in Matthew 5:39 and in Luke 6:29. Both times, your Bible translates it as "cheek." Yet both times the Greek says something different.

Thayer's Greek Lexicon defines *siagōn* as "the jaw, the jawbone." The parenthetical reads, "A.V. cheek," meaning the Authorized Version used the word "cheek," even though the underlying Greek means "jawbone." The primary meaning is bone; the cheek is simply the implied extension. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, *siagōn* translates the Hebrew word *lehi*, which means "jawbone." It is the same word used in Judges

15:15, when Samson picks up a donkey's jawbone and uses it as a weapon. He kills a thousand men with a jawbone. This is the same word, the same bone.

In First Kings 22:24, the prophet Zedekiah strikes Micaiah on the lehi—the jaw. In Job 16:10, Job says his enemies have struck him on the lehi. Wherever this word appears, it refers to bone, specifically the mandible. You have read "cheek" your entire life and pictured soft flesh being slapped, but the Greek says bone. Now look where that bone shows up again. The phrase "weeping and gnashing of teeth" appears seven times in Matthew and Luke. Matthew 8:12, Matthew 13:42, Matthew 13:50, Matthew 22:13, Matthew 24:51, Matthew 25:30, and Luke 13:28. Every time, it is paired with outer darkness or judgment.

The Greek word for gnashing is βρυγμός (brygmōs), an ancient Greek noun that translates to "grating," "gnashing," or "biting" of the teeth. It derives from the verb βρύχω (brychō), which originally meant to eat greedily and noisily, like a wild animal tearing at meat. Vincent's Word Studies confirms this. When Acts 7:54 says the Sanhedrin "gnashed their teeth" at Stephen, the word is brychō. They were not weeping; they were enraged! The jaw is the structure, and gnashing is what it does under stress.

The siagōn that gets struck in Matthew 5:39 is the same anatomical territory that clenches in fury throughout the gnashing passages. No different body part, no different word family. Same zone, same bone. You know this feeling. That moment when someone says something that hits you and your jaw locks before your mind even forms a response. Your teeth press together, and your molars clench. The words you want to fire back are already piling up behind your tongue before your conscious mind has decided anything. That is siagōn territory, the will center, the place where reactive determination locks in.

In this reading, the jawbone corresponds to the will—the place where reactive determination locks before the conscious mind chooses a response. This is correspondence; we are decoding the text. Now, the strike itself. The Greek word is ραπίζω (rhapizō), meaning "to strike, slap, or beat." Most commonly, it refers to a sharp slap to the face with the palm (often translated as "boxing the ear"), though it can also carry more violent meanings, such as thrashing or beating with a rod. Thayer's defines it as "to smite in the face with the palm of the hand, to box the ear." This is not referring to your fist. The related noun ράπισμα (rhapisma) appears three times in the Gospels, always during the trial of Jesus, and always describing slaps that carry a heavy cultural meaning of public degradation and insult, rather than blows of mortal combat.

The Greek New Testament contains at least five different words for striking someone:

1. Τύπτω (typtō), meaning to pummel with repeated blows.
2. Δέρω (derō), meaning to flay or scourge.
3. Πατάσσω (patassō), meaning to strike with a weapon, sometimes fatally.
4. Παίω (Paíō), meaning a single, abrupt blow or to strike.
5. Πλήσσω (Plässō), meaning to strike, smite, or hit.

Jesus had all of these available, but He chose rhapizo: the open—the palm strike, the degradation blow. Not injury, but insult.

The Mishnah, the Jewish oral law, assigned specific fines. Two hundred zuz for a palm slap. Four hundred zuz, double, for a backhanded slap. The Tosefta¹ explains the distinction. "Not a blow of pain, but a blow of shame." The backhand costs more because it humiliates more. And the verse says the right cheek. In a culture where the left hand was unclean, a right-handed person striking your right cheek can only do so with a backhand. That is not a fight between equals. That is a superior enforcing status on an inferior: master to slave, husband to wife, or Roman to Jew. This is a humiliating blow. This strike lands on the jawbone, the will center, as an insult blow, not a combat blow. But notice that the verse does not say forgive, nor does it say absorb. Before it tells you what to do, it tells you what NOT to do. And the word it uses is borrowed from the battlefield.

"Do not resist the one who is evil." That is how your Bible reads. You have always heard "resist" as a relatively gentle word, meaning do not mildly object, do not push back, just be passive. But the Greek word is ἀντιστῆναι (antistānai), the infinitive of ἀνθίστημι (anthistēmi). It is a compound word, where "anti" means against or opposite, and "histēmi" means to stand, to plant yourself, to set your position. Together, they mean to set yourself opposite and maintain your position. This is not gentle language.

In the Septuagint, anthistēmi appears dozens of times, often as a technical term for a military engagement in which two armies march toward each other until their ranks collide. Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, uses it repeatedly in military contexts. This is not "do not gently push back." This is "do not take up a locked opposing stance like two armies crashing into each other." Jesus is not saying to be passive. He is saying do not enter the collision.

You know this feeling. That locked-in state when you argue with someone and stop listening. You no longer hear what they say; you are building your counterattack. Both of you are rooted in your opinions. Neither of you is willing to move forward or retreat. So you brace against each other in a rigid mutual destruction. That is anthistēmi. But Jesus says μὴ ἀντιστῆναι (mē antistānai), "do not resist." This is a prohibition. Do not do this! Do not plant yourself opposite the painful stimulus. Do not lock your formation against it. The aorist tense makes clear that this is not about a general policy. It is a specific command for a specific moment. In the instant the jawbone is struck, do not set yourself opposite.

Think about what that means in practice. Every instinct after an insult is to square up, face the threat directly, lock eyes with your opponent, and hold your ground. This verse says that impulse, that squaring up, is exactly what you are *not* supposed to do. Not because fighting is wrong, but because locking into a reactive state only deepens the conflict.

In Galatians 2:11, Paul says he "opposed" Peter to his face. The Greek is ἀντεστην (antestēn), which shares the root anthistēmi. Paul took a firm, locked military stance against Peter when Peter was being a hypocrite about eating with Gentiles. He took a stand against Peter's actions

¹ A compilation of Jewish Oral Law from the late second century AD

and held firm. That was a righteous confrontation. Thus, anthistemi is not inherently sinful. Paul does it, and James commands it against the devil.

So, the question is not whether you ever take a stand. The question is what you are standing against. Now here is where it gets strange. The same root word appears again in James 4:7: "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." The Greek is ἀντίστητε (antistāte), the same root in the imperative mood. It is a direct command. Ephesians 6:13 uses antisteinai again, "Put on the full armor of God that you may be able to withstand in the evil day." The same word appears a third time in Matthew 5, where it is prohibited. It is commanded in James 4 and Ephesians 6. The same word, but opposite instruction. How can we reconcile that?

One resolution emerges from the text itself. You do not overcome a reactive inner state by standing against it, because that is fighting fire with fire, tensing against tension, and clenching harder against the clench applied to you. That is precisely what Matthew 5 prohibits. Conversely, you do take a firm stand against the spiritual patterns that generate those reactive states through prayer and watchfulness. This is what the books of James and Ephesians command. The object of the anthistemi determines whether you do it or refuse it.

So, Jesus prohibits the locked military stance toward the ponāros. Do not plant yourself opposite it. But that word, ponāros, translated "evil" in every English Bible you have ever read, has a root meaning that turns this entire verse inside out. The instruction that follows is not about endurance. It is a verb your Bible translates as "turn," and it has never once meant "absorb." Your Bible says "the evil one." You picture a villain. Someone out there. An enemy. A bad person doing bad things. Maybe the devil himself. When you pull up the full range of meaning for the Greek word ponāros, something you were never shown appears immediately. Ponāros comes from πόνος (ponos), meaning "pain, toil, labor, or suffering." Its meaning ranges from physical aches and heavy physical labor to emotional anguish and the effort required to achieve a difficult goal. The root describes someone ground down by work; someone pressed under a burden until they break.

Thayer's Lexicon includes a historical note that cannot be ignored. The word originally meant "full of labors, pressed and harassed by toils." Hesiod, one of the earliest Greek poets, writing seven centuries before Jesus, called Hercules πονηρότατος καὶ ἄριστος (ponārotatos kai aristos): "most toilsome and best." The word was not a moral judgment. It described someone crushed by a burden yet kept going anyway.

The church has taught this verse with deep sincerity for two thousand years. The ethical reading of ponāros as "the evil person" has motivated real acts of mercy and real courage. But the Greek root carries something the translation cannot convey. Look at how the same word behaves elsewhere in the New Testament. In Matthew 6:23, "If your eye is ponāros." Your Bible says "evil eye" or "bad eye." But the context is about vision, how you see. A ponāros eye in that verse is a dysfunctional eye, not a morally wicked one, but one in bad condition. In Ephesians 5:16, the days are ponāros. Not morally evil days, but days full of peril and toil, difficult, burdened, and heavy days. Also, in Revelation 16:2, "became a loathsome and malignant sore on

the people who had the mark of the beast and who worshiped his image." That is a ponāros sore, a painful, grievous wound. Not a morally evil wound, but a wound that throbs.

The word encompasses a range that your English Bible incorrectly collapses into a single moral category. To ponāros in Matthew 5:39 carries the root meaning that Thayer's preserves: not an external villain, but a burdened, pain-driven, reactive state in which the toilsome condition wants to lash out. That part of you, ground down by life, that clenches and lashes out before you choose to. The "evil one" reads as painful and labored—the part of your will that operates from exhaustion and burden, rather than from clarity.

Now the final word—the instruction: what Jesus actually tells you to do. Your Bible says "turn." You have always heard that as "to endure the next blow." Present the other cheek and voluntarily take another blow. The Greek word is στρέφω (strophō). And here is where the entire verse breaks open. Strong's defines strophō as "to twist, turn quite around, reverse." Thayer's says "to turn, turn round, change one's direction, be converted." HELPS Word Studies says "properly to turn, figuratively to convert by changing direction, an about face." Strophō never means endure. Not even once, not anywhere in any Greek text ever written. Not in the New Testament, not in the Septuagint, nor in secular Greek literature. The word means "redirect, reorient, change the direction you are facing, and execute an about face."

Jesus had the word "endure" available to him. It is ὑπομένω (hypomenō), meaning "stay under, remain beneath, bear patiently." Paul and James use it. It is the standard New Testament word for enduring suffering. But Jesus did not use it here. He also had the word for "tolerate": ἀνέχομαι (anechomai), meaning "hold yourself up against, put up with, bear with." He did not use that word either. Instead, He chose the word that means to turn completely around. The form he used is στρέψον (strophon), an aorist active imperative, and that matters. The aorist tense in Greek describes a single, one-time action, not a process or a gradual shift. It's one decisive act. The active voice means the subject performs the action, and the imperative mood means it is a command. Put those together, and strophon is a crisp, single, decisive command to perform one deliberate act of turning.

You know what this feels like. That moment when you realize you've been clenching your jaw, your fists, and your stomach against something painful. Then you choose to release the tension and turn within yourself. You're not giving up, not giving in, not absorbing, nor enduring. You are turning! That is strophō.

Reading it this way, the ponāros (evil) state corresponds to the reactive will under strain. It is the pain-driven clenching that precedes every harsh word and every locked argument. The strophō instruction corresponds to inner redirection, reorienting from defensive awareness to receptive awareness. The verse is not telling you to absorb the next blow. It is telling you to change direction within yourself before the blow defines you. This reading changes how the verse reads. When one's reactive will is struck by an insult, one should not lock into opposition against the painful state. Instead, redirect the frustration.

There is still one thread left open. The earlier jawbone and the redirection here converge in a verse most people have never connected to "turn the other cheek," and it uses the same word. In

Matthew 18:3, Jesus says, "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." The word for "turn" is *strephō*. This is the exact same word, written by the same author in the same Gospel, using the same command. In Matthew 18, no one disputes what *strephō* means. All commentaries agree that it means a complete reorientation, a fundamental change of consciousness. Not endurance, not patience, nor bearing up under weight. Conversion! An about-face of the entire inner life.

The passive voice of *στραφῆτε* (*straphēte*, "to turn around," "to change direction") in Matthew 18 suggests something enabled by God. Thus, it is a turning you cannot accomplish alone. Jesus uses that word for the most important turn a human being can make—the one required to enter the Kingdom. He also uses the exact same word in Matthew 5:39 for what you are supposed to do when your jawbone is struck. The implications are *enormous*. The *strephō* required to enter the Kingdom and the *strephō* required after an insult are the same verb from the same teacher.

Whatever Jesus means by "turn" in one place, he means the same in the other. If the kingdom turn is a total reorientation of consciousness, then the cheek turn is too. If the kingdom turn is not endurance, then the cheek turn is not endurance either. The jawbone that gnashes in outer darkness. That is the will center, locked in reactive opposition, as the state *anthistemi* describes. Two forces frozen against each other, the jaw is clenched, the teeth are grinding, and the animal response is firing. That is one outcome for the jawbone. The jawbone that turns in Matthew 5:39 is the same will executing the *strephō*. It neither clutches harder nor absorbs the next blow. It redirects; it's a decisive inner turn. That is the other outcome. The same bone has two possible outcomes: one gnashes, and the other turns.

Now reread the full verse with the Greek restored. Do not lock into military opposition against the burdened, pain-driven state. When it strikes your jawbone, your will centers on the dominant defensive side. Redirect yourself and turn. Execute the same inner about-face required to become like a child and enter the kingdom. This is not a verse about being polite when someone insults you. Rather, it is the same radical inner event Jesus says is required to enter the kingdom of heaven: the same verb, the same decisive reorientation. The moment you realize the person you have been fighting is not the real problem, the clenching inside you is. And something in you softens, redirects, and faces the other way. Then the whole conflict looks different from the other side. Not because the facts changed, but because your will's orientation changed, and you stopped grinding and started turning.

The verse is not a rule for treating enemies. This rendering offers a technique for realigning the will. A single decisive turn of the clenched jaw, away from locked opposition and toward open awareness. Reiterating: this is not passive acceptance or endurance. This is active redirection. That is the real meaning. Four Greek words in one verse: a jawbone, a military term, a burdened state, and a redirection command. You have been in this state a thousand times without knowing there was a Greek word for the bone that carries it. You are not absorbing the blow. You are not pretending it did not happen. You are not forgiving anyone in this moment. You are changing the direction of the will before the will decides for you. Four words. One

verse. An instruction that was never about the person who hit you. It was about the jaw that clenched before you chose what to do next.