

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' inaugural address, one of the most revolutionary statements ever uttered, and the portion (5:38-48) distills three full chapters of Matthew to their essence.

Let's go step by step. The traditional interpretation of "do not resist an evildoer" has been non-resistance to evil, which is an odd conclusion, since on all other occasions Jesus resisted evil with every fiber of his being. The Greek word translated here as "resist" literally means "to stand against," and it is most often used as a technical term for warfare: it describes the way opposing armies would march toward each other until their ranks met. There on the battlefield, they would "take a stand," which is to say they would begin fighting. By using this idiom, Jesus clearly has resistance in mind, so how did readers come to interpret this as an invitation to non-resistance?

You'll love this: the translators working for the King of England on what came to be known as the King James Bible were following orders, and the king did not want his subjects to think they had any recourse against his or any other sovereign's power. James commissioned a new translation, because he held to the divinity of kingship, and he regarded as "seditious, dangerous, and traitorous" tendencies recorded in the Geneva Bible (James quoted in *The Greatest English Classic*), which endorsed the right of disobedience against a miscreant leader.

(The Geneva Bible was published 51 years prior to the King James Version and was written by a group of dissenters who had fled England and the sovereign and settled in Switzerland. The Geneva Bible was the one used by Shakespeare and Oliver Cromwell and John Donne.) So since the Geneva Bible authorized the right to disobey a tyrant, King James pointedly asked his editors to endorse the right of kings. According to Walter Wink, "the public had to be made to believe that there are two responses (to violence) and only two: fight or flight." (*Jesus' Third Way*) So in the King James Version, Jesus is made to command us to not take a stand, to not resist, to

submit. In this choice of words, Jesus appears to authorize the absolute right of the one in power; according to these translators, submission is the will of God.

That shift is still recorded in "do not resist an evildoer," and not only is it confusing when laid alongside the other teachings of Jesus, it has been used to horrible effect, admonishing battered women to stay in abusive relationships, factory workers to cease from organizing, African-Americans to put up with their mistreatment, children to be seen but not heard.

But Jesus is not telling us to submit to evil here--to "not resist an evildoer" per se. He is saying to refuse to oppose evil on its own terms. The point is "we are not to let the opponent dictate the methods of our opposition. Jesus is urging us to transcend both passivity and violence by finding a third way, one that is at once assertive and yet non-violent." (Wink) A better translation of "do not resist an evil doer" would be, "Do not repay evil for evil."

The examples that follow in the text confirm this reading. To understand the admonition, "turn the other cheek," it is essential to note that the response follows a blow to the right cheek. To hit the right cheek with a fist, you have to use the left hand, but that gesture would be unlikely in Jesus' culture, not only because most people are right-handed, but also because the left hand was used for unclean tasks. So, to hit the other's right cheek with the likely hand, the only feasible blow is a backhand, and a backhand is used not to injure, but to insult or humiliate or degrade. You don't hit an equal with a backhand, but an inferior. Masters backhanded slaves in that culture, as well as husbands, wives; parents, children; Romans, Jews. The point of the backhand blow is to put someone back into his place.

Jesus' audience was used to being degraded, so he is saying, "Refuse to accept this kind of treatment anymore. If they backhand you, turn the other cheek." But how? He must have acted

this out for them, because it really only makes sense when you see it. "By turning the other cheek, the servant makes it impossible for the master to use the backhand again: his nose is in the way... And the left cheek now offers a perfect target for a blow with the right fist. But only equals fought with fists, so the servant has "won": the last thing the master wants to do is treat his underling as a peer." (Wink, *Transforming Bible Study*) By turning the other cheek, the inferior is saying, "I am a human being just like you, and I refuse to be humiliated. I am a child of God and your equal. I won't take it anymore." Without resorting to violence, without sinking to the enemy's level, the would-be victim wins.

And when large numbers begin behaving this way, and Jesus is speaking to a crowd here, you have a movement on your hands. The people have found their voice over against a power-hungry monarch. Is it any surprise that the patriots in America appealed to scriptures of this kind in their Boston tea party? Gandhi, too, taught that "the first principle of nonviolent action is that of non-cooperation with everything humiliating." (*Gandhi on Nonviolence*, Thomas Merton)

Jesus' second example of assertive nonviolence is set in a court of law: "If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give him your cloak as well." The scene here is a creditor who has taken a poor person to court over an unpaid loan, and only the poorest of the poor were subjected to this kind of treatment. Jewish law provided that a creditor could take as collateral for a loan a poor person's long outer coat, but the law went on to say that the coat had to be returned each evening so that one would have something in which to sleep. The cloak in this reading is the poor person's underwear. So why does Jesus counsel him to give over even his undergarments?

When you see that the picture here is of the man stripping off all of his clothing and marching out of court stark naked, you begin to realize that again Jesus is counseling a clever non-violent

response. Nakedness was taboo in Judaism, and importantly, shame fell less on the naked party than on the person who views or causes the nakedness. So by stripping in this way at an unfair demand, the debtor, the poorest of the poor, has brought shame on the greedy creditor.

The third example requires remembering that the gospels take place in a setting of military occupation, (Israel is a vassal state of Rome), and knowing the practice of limiting to a single mile the amount of forced labor a Roman soldier could levy on a subject. Anyone found on the street could be coerced into this kind of service, as was Simon of Cyrene, who was forced to carry Jesus' cross on the way to his crucifixion. In this context of occupation, Jesus suggests that you'll throw the oppressor off balance if you offer to do more than expected. "Hey soldier... Thanks for asking me to carry your 100 pound pack for you. No Problem. Now I'll just carry it another mile." Surely the audience was chuckling to itself at this picture: imagine a seemingly invincible Roman soldier pleading with a scruffy Jewish peasant to give him back his pack.

To those whose pattern had been to cringe before a tyrant, Jesus offers a way to liberate themselves. There was no reason to wait until Rome had fallen, until peasants had land, or until slaves were freed. Jesus' first followers could claim their dignity and recover their humanity, and we can do the same thing now. The kingdom of God is breaking into the old order, not as an imposition from on high, but as leaven slowly causing the dough to rise. The little ones can do something big...the poor in fact and the poor in spirit can be literally subversive, using words from below to redefine power altogether. And those who have been denied a voice or those who stand with the silenced don't have to perpetuate the problem: We can resist the enemy without becoming like him, if we will turn from hate and fear. Pogo looked in the mirror 50 years ago and said, "We have met the enemy and he is us," and Jesus says "So is your neighbor. Now love

them both.” A third way, neither fighting nor fleeing, but engaging as equals, ennobling ourselves and the other, maybe one day embracing, allows both sides to win.

In *Rumours of Another World*, Philip Yancey tells this story from South Africa. In one of the Truth and Reconciliation hearings, organized by Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela, a policeman named Van de Broek recounted for the commission how he, together with other officers, had shot at point blank range an 18 year old boy, and then burned his body to destroy the evidence. The policeman went on to describe how eight years later, he returned to the boy’s home and forced his mother to watch as he likewise killed her husband.

The judge asked, “What do you want from this man,” and the courtroom grew hushed as the elderly woman responded. “I want him to go to the place where my husband was burned, and gather up the dust there so that I can give him a decent burial.” The policeman nodded in assent. After a silence the woman continued, “Mr. Van de Broek took all my family away from me, but I still have a lot of love to give. Twice a month, I would like for him to come to my home and spend a day with me, so I can be a mother to him. (For him to turn out like he did, he must not have had the mothering that he needs.) And I would like Mr. Van de Broek to know that he is forgiven by God, and that I forgive him too. I would like to embrace him now so he can know my forgiveness is real.”

That is redefining power. We don’t love our enemies because they deserve it. We love them because they are our sisters and brothers. We love them because God loves us, wounded and vengeful and scruffy as we are. Jesus said, “You are familiar with the old written rule, ‘Love your neighbor’ and its unwritten companion, ‘Hate your enemy.’ I am challenging that. I’m telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst.”