

Matthew 5:38-48
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“Turn the other Cheek”

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I still remember my grade school bully. For weeks, he came up to me every day demanding the money I brought for chocolate milk. He never hurt me, but he threatened to. I told my parents about it, they followed up with the school, but somehow each day he found me. Finally my Dad said, “You know Bill it is possible the only way to get this guy to stop is when he asks for your money, you say “no.” But I want to be clear he may follow through on his threats and start to hit you. If he does you can fight back.” I thought about Dad’s advice for another couple weeks until one day I had enough. The bully asked me, and I said, “No!” He threatened me and again I said “No.” I was ready to get punched hard when he looked at me and said, “Well ok.” After that he never hit me or bullied me again. But let me say out loud and clearly that not everyone who deals with a bully is so lucky. As we consider this familiar scenario, Jesus gives us confusing advice.

Jesus says, “Do not resist one who is evil” and this has often been misunderstood as teaching we should not stand up for ourselves. When understood this way this story has become the worst sort of justification for exerting power in relationships resulting in abuse of women and children, bullying at school, and wider oppression of other groups. Yet, I hope we understand that is not what Jesus is saying,

Jesus isn’t telling the crowd to roll over and let others take advantage of them. But, he also isn’t providing the crowd with a self-preservation model. The problem begins with the word resist. The Greek term *antistennai* means “stand against.” Ephesians 6:13 uses this same greek word, “Therefore put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand (*antistennai*) in that evil day . . .”

SO here Jesus is teaching not to resist violently. Don't let your enemy drag you down to their level. When we return violence for violence, we begin an escalating spiral of violence as we saw in the Children’s sermon this morning.

Just over a week ago, Civil Rights leader, James Lawson, spoke at Wiley College in Marshall, Texas. The son of a Methodist minister, Lawson helped organize the civil rights march on Washington DC and the Freedom Rides of 1961. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called Lawson “The leading theorist and strategist on non-violence in the world.”

In his lecture, Lawson observed, “When you look at nonviolent actions in the last hundred years they have been more effective than violence... Data shows nonviolent struggles have been 56 percent effective, violent struggles only about 23 percent effective.”

Let’s look at the sayings a little closer. The first is, “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.” Ok, if I strike a blow with my right fist to your face, it would land on your

left cheek. But Jesus says, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek..." The only way in ancient society the "right hand of power" could strike a subject on the left cheek is with the back of the hand. And the left hand couldn't be used according to ancient customs, it was reserved for other duties.

The back of the hand was not primarily intended to injure, but to maintain power structures. The back of the hand was used from a position of superiority to put an "inferior" person back in their place; as in a master to a slave or a Roman official to a Jewish citizen.

So if you turned your head to the right, I could no longer backhand you. Your nose is in the way; so, by turning the other cheek you are non-violently saying to the master, "I refuse to be humiliated by you any longer. I am a human being just like you. I am a child of God. You may have me killed but you can no longer put me down." This is not the way to avoid trouble; but it is a non-violent way of standing against inequality.

The second instance, "If anyone takes you to court and sues you for your outer garment, give your undergarment as well." This situation is dealing with collateral for a loan. In the ancient world usually land or animals were used as collateral, but the poor people were allowed to hock their outer garment, the long robe used as pajama's at night and an overcoat during the day. The creditor had to return the "collateral" every night but could come get it every morning harassing the debtor endlessly. We might think of it as two daily visits from a bill collector to our front door.

Jesus' audience was made up of people who owed money. So, Jesus says, "Ok You aren't going to win the case, so when you get to court and you have been putting up with this harassment for months, throw the law to the point of absurdity. When your creditor sues for your outer garment give your undergarment as well.

See the ancient people needed an Undy 500 in those days. People didn't wear them so "giving also your cloak" meant taking off the only stitch of clothing you had left on and standing unclothed in court. The ancient law teaches the shame of being unclothed in public falls not on the unclothed person, but on the person who caused the situation. So this one who is coming to the debtor's house day and night, interrupting meals, waking his family from sleep, he is now put in a position of shame. Imagine leaving the courtroom and all the townsfolk are wondering...where are your clothes? People follow you through town. The rumor mill gets going. And as the debtor you say, "My creditor got all my clothes in the lawsuit." It will be quite some time before anyone takes a creditor to court in your village.

Jesus' third example is, "If someone forces you to carry their pack one mile, carry it two." The setting is ancient Military law which permitted soldiers to grab a civilian and force them to carry their packs one mile. These packs were heavy weighing 65-85 pounds, and if you didn't carry it you were in violation of the law. But, to add some protection to the citizens military law stated if the civilian carried the pack more than one mile, then the soldier was in violation. So, Jesus is saying, "All right. Since there is no law to protect you when forced to carry a pack -- The next

time it happens, cooperate. Carry the pack but keep going beyond one mile and then the soldier will be in violation.”

As we look at these, I want to be clear, none of this is easy to apply. Jesus knows he has set the bar impossibly high when he says, “be perfect as God is perfect.” Yet, Jesus is articulating a non-violent response to overcoming domination systems.

We may be far away from ancient Palestine, but we live in a society with power imbalances, injustice and violence.

Certainly, Jesus is not offering a course in personal security; he is offering the difficult, scary, challenging path he himself followed.

A colleague tells of a vacation he took to western North Carolina. One day he drove to the highest point in the mountains, “I began to look around at the vegetation on this rocky mountaintop and noticed a flower blooming there, in a place where there was no soil and conditions were windy and dry. This purple bloom came right out of a rock like a gift of beauty.

The ranger said, the seeds are blown by the wind and deposit themselves in the tiniest of crevasses, and the plants have adapted to flourishing in a landscape that is typically hostile. Eventually, he said, the plant itself may crack the rock in which it grew; it would take time and persistence.

How like that flower are the seeds of the new order which Jesus teaches us today? When we follow our Savior we may find well placed cracks where the Kingdom of God is blooming. And when we see those cracks we know the old order is beginning to shatter as Jesus’ Realm of Justice and love Jesus blooms.

Amen.