

For most of my life, this reading made no sense to me.

I have never struck another human being in anger. And the only person who has ever struck me in anger was my mother. She had a narcissistic personality disorder and when she disappeared into one of her narcissistic rages, she hit me a lot – from the time I was a toddler until I was old enough to stop her. We went to church every Sunday, and my early religious training was that Jesus wanted me to stand there and take whatever my out-of-control mother unloaded.

By high school, I had a *lot* of questions. A Methodist youth group minister once tried to answer them by saying “Well, someone suing the shirt right off your back must really have it in for you. If a guy’s *that* desperate, it’s probably not the time to stand up for your rights. But if you wrapped up your shirt in your best coat and gave it to him like a present, you’d really be sticking it to him!”

“It’s the same thing about going the second mile,” he explained. “If anyone forces you to do something, do more because overextending yourself really irritates them.”

Years later, with the benefit of several different forms of therapy, I learned that these answers are mostly just passive aggression¹. “Stick it to them.” “Irritate them.” But not directly. We all resist indirectly from time to time, but left unchecked, it can become a form of emotional manipulation that erodes trust between people.

I can’t imagine that when Jesus said “Do not resist an evildoer” that he meant “Instead of being upfront and honest, express your hostilities and frustrations only indirectly.” Jesus consistently resisted evil. He was no milquetoast and certainly no stranger to human emotions. Jesus never told struggling people to give up their hope for justice. He never told people forced into physical labor to work harder out of sheer spite. And Jesus never intended for people being abused or battered to become doormats while someone hurts them.

Now, clearer minds than mine have wrestled with this reading. St. Augustine interpreted it as a teaching about non-resistance and concluded that Christians should not defend themselves against an aggressor. But he also decided that the commandment to love our neighbor required us to defend others, even by arming ourselves.

¹ Passive aggressive behavior involves denying or stuffing our feelings of anger or helplessness in ways that turn into submissive but negative actions.

To this day, there are Anglicans who hear Jesus insisting on pacifism. A few of them reject even non-violent direct action and civil disobedience. Many more Anglican voices see armed resistance to violence as regrettable but unavoidable, with the caution that it should be engaged only in the pursuit of justice. It seems that, for now, we still need people willing to go up on the wall.

We can all advocate for God's emerging peace and foster the hope of that peace coming in its fullness, but in the meantime, what do we do with this reading?

Jesus *appears* to leave us with only two options, neither of which are particularly life-affirming: a passivity that leads to self-neglect or an aggression that perpetuates violence. Fortunately, it is only the *appearance* of a limited choice; an appearance that became entrenched by the 17th c. Anglican church.

I'm sure you know that James, King of Great Britain, commissioned the translation of the bible that still bears his name. But you may not know that James was reacting to an earlier translation, the Geneva Bible. That version contained what the king considered "seditious...dangerous and trayterous" tendencies, including the right to disobey a tyrant.

Consequently, the king's translators, hoping to keep their heads somewhere in the neighborhood of their necks, left readers with the conclusion that they had no recourse against a sovereign's tyranny. That means that in the most widely read version of scripture in the United States, Jesus appears to authorize the supreme authority of the monarch as the will of God.

Many translators still endorse some version of the King's agenda. But there is something still alive, something radical, in the older texts. Earlier renderings of Matthew's Gospel do not say: "Do not resist an evildoer." Instead, they read more like: "Don't react violently against the one who is evil." This version is supported by three different epistles that teach "Do not repay evil for evil."

You see, despite King James' motives, Jesus is *not* telling us to submit passively to evil. In fact, our failure to stand up to evil is exactly how evil thrives. Jesus *is* saying that standing up to evil does not demand creating more evil. Fighting evil through retaliation and revenge infects our own hearts with evil. Jesus here is urging us to look for third ways that transcend both passivity and hateful violence; to create new responses, tempered in the crucible of love, that resist evil assertively but without becoming seed-beds for new evil.

Matthew's Jewish Jesus is deepening Torah by inspiring people to break free from cycles of violence, humiliation and injustice. The examples that he gives not only break those cycles, but open opportunities for agents of evil to change; to get back in right relationship.

Let me show you what I mean. Why do you suppose Matthew's Jesus is so specific about being struck on the *right* cheek? Well, there are some things you should know about first century Mediterranean culture. People used their left hand for, to put it delicately, toilet duties and would never even think to touch another person with that hand. Only the right hand is available for striking another person.

You could close your right hand into a fist, but you could only hit the other person's left cheek. Hitting the left cheek with a right-hand fist was reserved for fighting with someone you considered an equal. The only way to hit a person on the right cheek with your right hand is to backhand them. And that is the way that masters struck slaves, or that Romans struck Jews.

Offering the other cheek did not invite more abuse. The confusing move was a silent invitation for the aggressor to strike one's left cheek with the right fist – a backhand is no longer possible. By turning the other cheek, the person being hit is making a claim to equality. With silent defiance, the person turning their cheek strips the aggressor of the power to dehumanize. This is what Mahatma Gandhi meant when he said: "The first principle of nonviolent action is that of non-cooperation with everything humiliating."

The second example involves the Jewish law that allowed a creditor to take a poor person's wool outercoat, a robe called a *himaton*, as collateral for a loan. The law required the creditor to return the robe each evening so the indebted person had something to wear to bed. To sue someone of their robe was a dehumanizing move to leave them beyond destitute.

Jesus recommends giving the creditor one's cloak as well. The cloak, called a *chiton*, was a person's linen underwear. To give up both would leave a person standing naked, possibly right there in the courtroom. Now, in first century Judaism, far more shame fell on the person *causing* nakedness than on the person without clothes. So Jesus here is not advising people to compound their disadvantage by giving up on justice. He is showing despondent people how to act on their own behalf by using the system against itself, while providing an opportunity for others to repent; to return to right relationship.

Going the second mile, Jesus' third example, comes from the Roman practice of forcing the people under their power to work. Anyone on the street could be pressed into service in the way that Simon of Cyrene was forced to carry Jesus' cross. Roman military code allowed foot-soldiers to make local civilians carry their packs, but for *no more* than one mile.

Anything further was an infraction that carried unpleasant consequences for the soldier. A citizen walking the second mile would put the entire systemic condition on full display, forcing the soldier to rethink the situation. Once again,

this option changes the civilian from a victim into an actor and creates an opening for positive change; an opening to repent.

In seeking these kinds of creative alternatives, we resist evil without becoming what we are fighting against. We resist evil without resorting to dehumanizing ourselves or other people. We resist with love as children of God and so become more perfectly the people and the community that God created us to be; images and bearers of God, our heavenly parent, who is *perfectly* who God is.

We become more perfect, not as in flawless, not even perfect in a moral sense, but more perfect in attaining the kingdom of heaven that God intends for us. By standing with God against evil, we help God's love shine just a little brighter and the world become a little less hateful.

"Returning hate for hate multiplies hate," Dr. Martin Luther King once wrote, "adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

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