

# Jesus' Third Way of Nonviolent Resistance

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Compiled from the works of Walter Wink by the Reverend Charles Moorhouse Bidwell, PhD with permission of Dr Wink.

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Jesus urged us all to love our enemies.

*Loving your Enemy* means enabling them to see their violence **and** offer them the opportunity to change ['repent' originally meant to turn, to change direction].

Faced with oppression, aggression, injustice or violence, we usually or naturally respond in one of 2 ways - **fight** or **flight**.

In the **fight** mode, we retaliate, get back, seek revenge, or we want an eye-for-an-eye (plus 'interest') punishment.

In the **flight** mode, we run, escape, ignore, never speak to them again, or avoid facing the challenge. One of the failings of this is that it can leave the aggressor thinking that they were justified in the first place and that they have won, conquered, succeeded, and that they should deal with others like that in the future.

The fact that something works the first time reinforces its use the next time. So there is no process toward peace (*shalom* - right relationships)

Is there a third, more creative option, beyond fight or flight?

## Non-Violent Resistance

Jesus did not leave us many clues as to how to deal with violence and injustice from others - he usually was telling us how to be peaceful and just to others or how not to oppress or be violent to others. But we do have two accounts (in Matthew 5 and Luke 6) that describe Jesus' 'third way'.

Jesus' third way of creative, loving, non-violent resistance is clearly the only way to love your enemies and it's the way to bring the reign of God's love and peace into our world and personal lives.

The reason that this may all be news to you is that for centuries the church has interpreted/preached 'passive' behaviour in the face of aggression. Many church leaders have been seduced into a conspiracy of teaching that you should bear with abuse, or being used, by those with power over you. It has taught that you should 'go the second mile' and endure a marriage that is killing your spirit. It has taught that you should 'turn the other cheek'. As a result, many violent behaviours have been ignored, if not sanctioned, in the service of avoiding conflict and exposing abuse. Jesus did not teach 'peace at any price'.

I think these misinterpretations defy our Hebrew vision of a God who protects the oppressed, the poor, the widows and children. How can we read the many sections of our Hebrew Scriptures and still see Jesus saying that if someone hits you just 'turn the other cheek' so they can hit you again, and hang in there in the face of abuse.

Such an interpretation may have suited the male-dominated world of the past because it could be used to support the idea of the 'family unit', even when abuse was present from a father. But it should not now, or ever, be tolerated. There is a more reasonable interpretation that seems to me to be much more consistent with the whole teachings of Jesus.

Jesus never taught passivity in the face of evil. Jesus also never taught that violence is the appropriate response to evil.

What makes much more sense is to find a meaning that meshes with all the other passages that call us to love our enemies and do good to them that misuse us.

You do aggressors no good by reflecting back their violence; that is what is often meant by 'resisting evil' - being so resistant that we act as a brick wall and bounce the evil back - a retaliation in a like manner.

You do aggressors no good by fleeing and letting them think that they've won.

You 'love your enemy' when you show them how they are being unjust and when you give them the opportunity to grow and learn from that experience and to be open to God's grace to change their violent and unjust and oppressive ways.

Nothing can be assumed when you read the Bible. It contains the word of God, but you have to dig it out for yourself - you have to read between the lines and set the words in the context of the time so that you hear what is being said the way the writer and the listeners meant it and heard it to mean at the time it was spoken.

Let's look at each of three directives from Jesus to those who would lead Jesus' third way of creative, loving, non-violent resistance; and let me describe *the socio-political situation at the time* and what this word picture would have meant to those who heard it in the first place.

Here are the words recorded in various translations of the original Greek in Matthew chapter 5: 38-41.

*You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'*

*But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the **right** cheek, turn to him the other also;*

*and if any one would **sue** you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well;*

*and if any one **forces** you to go one mile, go with him two miles."*

These are not directions to lie down and let people walk all over you. These are not calls to be passive and take whatever abuse oppressors want to place on you by their power over you.

**These are guidelines from Jesus for nonviolent resistance.**

Notice that none of them are pleas for help from a less powerful person; they all involve someone with power over another, enough to 'strike', 'sue', and 'force'. Let's look more closely at each one and uncover the good news within them.

The first illustration Jesus gives is to **turn the other cheek** when someone hits you. This makes no sense. How does this help you or the other? How is this loving? How is this just?

But wait, Matthew records Jesus as saying 'turn the LEFT cheek'. Why such a specific direction?

## Turn the other cheek

Matt reads, "If someone strikes you on the **right** cheek..."

Let's discover what this word picture would have meant to those who heard it in the first place.

**Social Context:** it was a time of slavery and Jesus was usually talking to the common folk and many of his listeners were slaves. He knew that a master has *power over* another and did not treat slaves as equals. Slaves were reprimanded by a slap with *the back of the right hand to the right cheek of the slave*.

You try this now and see how easy it is and how it feels. But to strike a peer, someone your equal, you would use your fist and hit directly, usually to the left cheek. [This all assumes that the person hitting is right-handed.]

You cannot hit a **left** cheek with the back of a **right** hand!

### **Consequence:**

Jesus directs us to turn the other cheek - the left cheek

- that forces the hitter to hit you as an equal
- that alerts the hitter that they are treating you as a lessor
- that allows them to see that they are abusing their power over you and to consider changing their behaviour.

This makes more sense. Now this directive to turn the left cheek meshes with everything else that we have been told by Jesus to do to enter the realm of God's heaven on earth.

- show love for your neighbours even when they abuse you
- but show love by pointing out the unjust nature of their acts and

giving them the chance to change their minds and act more justly or more lovingly.

But what does this have to do with loving the enemy that would strike us? And how does it apply to what we experience today?

You love someone when you wish and work for the best for them. Sometimes it gets down to what is called 'tough love' because you don't do what they want you to do but you make them do something for themselves - you make them discover their own resources or you make them discover that what they have been getting away with is neither going to continue to work nor be tolerated in the same way. You are pointing out to them where they are abusing you or the situation and you are opening them to the opportunity to learn and change and grow. That is a loving thing to do and sometimes it's very hard to do because they accuse you of not loving them because you won't do for them what you used to do.

To the enemies who wield power over you and abuse that power, you can say or show that they do not have the same power any more and that they will have to treat you as an equal - as another child of God, not a slave.

We've probably misunderstood these directives from Jesus for centuries because we didn't read every word and place the passage in the social context of the day it was spoken. If you are surprised by this understanding, I can appreciate that; I was surprised when I heard it from Walter Wink and have since read it in two of his books, but is this an isolated case? No.

Let's consider the other two and see if they are consistent.

### **Let him have your cloak**

Jesus knew that this was a radical way to show love and so he gave a second example - "giving your cloak to the one who sues you for your coat."

To the enemy who wields power over you and abuses that power, you can show that they do not have the same power any more and that they will have to treat you as an equal - as another child of God, not a slave.

Matthew reads "If someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well."

Let's discover what this word picture would have meant to those who heard it in the first place.

***Social Context:*** poor farmers and wealthy land-grabbers, word of honor, role of coat, Levitical Law, land-grabbers: greed, distrust, collateral vs. word for seed loan

***Consequence:*** Without his coat, any peasant would be without a covering at night. It gets cold in that desert land once the sun goes down. Getting chilled night after night weakens the body and makes you susceptible to disease. In such a weakened or ill state you can't tend your crops well and your harvest fails, so the landlord can claim his land back and leave you without any means of support.

Jesus directs the one being sued to give the rest of his clothing - to the point where he is naked. In the Hebrew tradition, to behold nakedness is a shame on the one who is looking.

Noah was drunk and fell asleep uncovered; so his sons Shem & Japheth walked into his tent backwards and covered their father's nakedness (Gen 9:18-27).

Giving away your clothes as recompense to the person suing you forces the suer and all witnesses to this injustice by shaming them:

- alerting them that they are treating you as a lessor
- and allowing them to see that they are abusing their power over you through wealth, and to consider changing their behaviour.

This makes sense. Now this directive to let them have all your clothes to shame them into thinking again about this law suit meshes with everything else that we have been told by Jesus to do to enter the realm of God's heaven on earth.

## **Going the second mile**

Matthew reads "*If someone forces you to go one mile, go two miles.*"

Let's discover what this word picture would have meant to those who heard it in the first place.

***Social Context:*** The people Jesus was talking to were under Roman occupation and the authorities had agreed that it was permissible for a Roman soldier to conscript a Jew to carry his pack for one mile. The Romans were very methodical and organized and there were mile-markers along major roads (some are still visible in Britain from the Roman occupation there).

***Consequences:*** A violation of this agreement, such as forcing someone to carry their pack beyond one mile, was a punishable offense and the soldier would get into trouble.

Jesus directs his followers to (offer to) go a second mile.

- that forces the soldier to see that they are using their authority over you and not treating you as an equal,
- that alerts the officer that they are treating you as a lesser
- that allows them to see that they are abusing their power over you and to consider changing their behaviour.

This is another example of Jesus calling his followers to point out the abuses of others out of their power positions and not out of love. You creatively point out their abuse and you open them to the opportunity to learn and change and grow. That is a loving thing to do and sometimes it's very hard to do because they accuse you of not loving them because you won't do for them what you used to do.

This makes more sense of the Matthew text. Now this directive to offer to go the second mile meshes with everything else we have been told by Jesus to love our enemies and so enter the realm of God's realm of love here on earth.

Dealing with abuse is complicated. So often, we who are abused become the abusers. Nelson Mandela warned us of that when he was released from prison. But he had been working on his own character for those twenty years. He had built moral power and was in control of his destiny.

