
JESUS' THIRD WAY

by Walter Wink

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Many otherwise devout Christians simply dismiss Jesus' teachings about nonviolence out of hand as impractical idealism. And with good reason. "Turn the other cheek" has come to imply a passive, doormat-like quality that has made the Christian way seem cowardly and complicit in the face of injustice. "Resist not evil" seems to break the back of all opposition to evil and to counsel submission. "Going the second mile" has become a platitude meaning nothing more than "extend yourself" and appears to encourage collaboration with the oppressor. Jesus' teaching, viewed this way, is impractical, masochistic, and even suicidal—an invitation to bullies and spouse-batterers to wipe up the floor with their supine Christian victims.

Jesus never displayed that kind of passivity. Whatever the source of the misunderstanding, such distortions are clearly neither in Jesus nor his teaching, which, in context, is one of the most revolutionary political statements ever uttered:

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 an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile (Matt. 5:38-41; see also Luke 6:29).

The traditional interpretation of "do not resist an evildoer" has been *nonresistance* to evil—an odd conclusion, given the fact that on every occasion Jesus himself resisted evil with every fiber of his being. The fifth-century theologian Augustine agreed that the gospel teaches nonresistance, and therefore declared that a Christian must not attempt self-defense. However, he noted, if someone is attacking *my neighbor*, then the love commandment requires me to defend my neighbor, by force of arms if necessary. With that deft stroke, Augustine opened the door to the just-war theory, the military defense of the Roman Empire, and the use of torture and capital punishment. Following his lead, Christians have ever since been justifying wars fought for nothing more than national interest as "just."

Curiously enough, some pacifists have also bought the nonresistance interpretation, and therefore have rejected nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience as coercive and in violation of the law of Christ. But the gospel does not teach nonresistance to evil. Jesus counsels resistance, but without violence. The Greek word translated "resist" in Matt. 5:39 is *antistenai*, meaning literally to stand (*stenai*) against (*anti*). What translators have over-looked is that *antistenai* is most often used in the Greek version of the Old Testament as a technical term for warfare. It describes the way opposing armies would march toward each other until their ranks met. Then they would "take a stand," that is, fight. Ephesians 6:13 uses precisely this imagery: "Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand [*antistenai*] on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm *istenai*." The image is not of a punch-drunk boxer somehow managing to stay on his feet, but of soldiers standing their ground, refusing to flee. In short, *antistenai* means more here than simply to "resist" evil. It means to resist violently, to revolt or rebel, to engage in an armed insurrection.

The Bible translators working in the hire of King James on what came to be known as the King James Version knew that the king did not want people to conclude that they had any recourse against his or any other sovereign's tyranny. James had explicitly commissioned a new translation of the Bible because of what he regarded as "seditious . . . dangerous, and trayterous" tendencies in the marginal notes printed in the Geneva Bible, which included endorsement of the right to disobey a tyrant. Therefore the public had to be made to believe that there are two alternatives, and only two: flight or fight. And Jesus is made to command us, according to these king's men, to resist not. Jesus appears to authorize monarchical absolutism. Submission is the will of God. And most modern translators have meekly followed in that path.

Jesus is not telling us to submit to evil, but to refuse to oppose it on its own terms. We are not to let the opponent dictate the methods of our opposition. He is urging us to transcend both passivity and violence by finding a third way, one that is at once assertive and yet nonviolent. The correct translation would be the one still preserved in the earliest renditions of this saying found in the New Testament epistles: "Do not repay evil for evil" (Rom. 12:17; 1 Thes. 5:15; 1 Pet. 3:9). The Scholars Version of Matt. 5:39a is superb: "Don't react violently against the one who is evil."

TURN THE OTHER CHEEK

The examples that follow confirm this reading. "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" (Matt. 5:39b). You are probably imagining a blow with the right fist. But such a blow would fall on the *left* cheek. To hit the right cheek with a fist would require the left hand. But the left hand could be used only for unclean tasks; at Qumran, a Jewish religious community of Jesus' day, to gesture with the left hand meant exclusion from the meeting and penance for ten days. To grasp this you must physically try it: how would you hit the other's right cheek with your right hand? If you have tried it, you will know: the only feasible blow is a backhand.

The backhand was not a blow to injure, but to insult, humiliate, degrade. It was not administered to an equal, but to an inferior. Masters backhanded slaves; husbands, wives; parents, children; Romans, Jews. The whole point of the blow was to force someone who was out of line back into place.

Notice Jesus' audience: "If anyone strikes *you*." These are people used to being thus degraded. He is saying to them, "Re-fuse to accept this kind of treatment anymore. If they backhand you, turn the other cheek." (Now you *really* need to physically enact this to see the problem.) By turning the cheek, the servant makes it impossible for the master to use the backhand again: his nose is in the way. And anyway, it's like telling a joke twice; if it didn't work the first time, it simply won't work. The left cheek now offers a perfect target for a blow with the right fist; but only equals fought with fists, as we know from Jewish sources, and the last thing the master wishes to do is to establish this underling's equality. This act of defiance renders the master incapable of asserting his dominance in this relationship. He can have the slave beaten, but he can no longer cow him. By turning the cheek, then, the "inferior" is saying: "I'm a human being, just like you. I refuse to be humiliated any longer. I am your equal. I am a child of God. I won't take it anymore."

Such defiance is no way to avoid trouble. Meek acquiescence is what the master wants. Such "cheeky" behavior may call down a flogging, or worse. But the point has been made. The Powers That Be have lost their power to make people submit. And when large numbers begin behaving thus (and Jesus was addressing a crowd), you have a social revolution on your hands.

In that world of honor and shaming, the "superior" has been rendered impotent to instill shame in a subordinate. He has been stripped of his power to dehumanize the other. As Gandhi taught, "The first principle of nonviolent action is that of non-cooperation with everything humiliating."

How different this is from the usual view that this passage teaches us to turn the other cheek so our batterer can simply clobber us again! How often that interpretation has been fed to battered wives and children. And it was never what Jesus intended in the least. To such victims he advises, "Stand up for yourselves, defy your masters, assert your humanity; but don't answer the oppressor in kind. Find a new, third way that is neither cowardly submission nor violent reprisal."

STRIP NAKED

Jesus' second example of assertive nonviolence is set in a court of law. A creditor has taken a poor man to court over an unpaid loan. Only the poorest of the poor were subjected to such treatment. Deuteronomy 24:10-13 provided that a creditor could take as collateral for a loan a poor person's long outer robe, but it had to be returned each evening so the poor man would have something in which to sleep.

Jesus is not advising people to add to their disadvantage by renouncing justice altogether, as so many commentators have suggested. He is telling impoverished debtors, who have nothing left but the clothes on their backs, to use the system against itself.

Indebtedness was a plague in first-century Palestine. Jesus' parables are full of debtors struggling to salvage their lives. Heavy debt was not, however, a natural calamity that had overtaken the incompetent. It was the direct consequence of Roman imperial policy. Emperors taxed the wealthy heavily to fund their wars. The rich naturally sought non-liquid investments to hide their wealth. Land was best, but it was ancestrally owned and passed down over generations, and no peasant would voluntarily relinquish it. However, exorbitant interest (25 to 250 percent) could be used to drive landowners ever deeper into debt. And debt, coupled with the high taxation required by Herod Antipas to pay Rome tribute, created the economic leverage to pry Galilean peasants loose from their land. By the time of Jesus we see this process already far advanced: large estates owned by absentee landlords, managed by stewards, and worked by tenant farmers, day laborers, and slaves. It is no accident that the first act of the Jewish revolutionaries in 66 c.e. was to burn the temple treasury, where the record of debts was kept. It is to this situation that Jesus speaks. His hearers are the poor ("if any one would sue you"). They share a rankling hatred for a system that subjects them to humiliation by

stripping them of their lands, their goods, and finally even their outer garments.

Why, then, does Jesus counsel them to give over their undergarments as well? This would mean stripping off all their clothing and marching out of court stark naked! Nakedness was taboo in Judaism, and shame fell less on the naked party than on the person viewing or causing the nakedness (Gen. 9:20-27). By stripping, the debtor has brought shame on the creditor.

Imagine the guffaws this saying must have evoked. There stands the creditor, covered with shame, the poor debtor's outer garment in the one hand, his undergarment in the other. The tables have suddenly been turned on the creditor. The debtor had no hope of winning the case; the law was entirely in the creditor's favor. But the poor man has transcended this attempt to humiliate him. He has risen above shame. At the same time, he has registered a stunning protest against the system that created his debt. He has said in effect, "You want my robe? Here, take everything! Now you've got all I have except my body. Is that what you'll take next?"

Imagine the debtor leaving court naked. His friends and neighbors, aghast, inquire what happened. He explains. They join his growing procession, which now resembles a victory parade. This is guerrilla theater! The entire system by which debtors are oppressed has been publicly unmasked. The creditor is revealed to be not a legitimate moneylender but a party to the reduction of an entire social class to landlessness and destitution. This unmasking is not simply punitive, since it offers the creditor a chance to see, perhaps for the first time in his life, what his practices cause, and to repent.

The Powers That Be literally stand on their dignity. Nothing deflates them more effectively than deft lampooning. By refusing to be awed by their power, the powerless are emboldened to seize the initiative, even where structural change is not immediately possible. This message, far from counseling an unattainable otherworldly perfection, is a practical, strategic measure for empowering the oppressed. It is being lived out all over the world today by previously powerless people ready to take their history into their own hands. Shortly before the fall of political apartheid in South Africa, police descended on a squatters' camp they had long wanted to demolish. They gave the few women there five minutes to gather their possessions, and then the bulldozers would level their shacks. The women, apparently sensing the residual puritanical streak in rural Afrikaners, stripped naked before the bulldozers. The police turned and fled. So far as I know, that camp still stands.

Jesus' teaching on nonviolence provides a hint of how to take on the entire system by unmasking its essential cruelty and burlesquing its pretensions to justice. Those who listen will no longer be treated as sponges to be squeezed dry by the rich. They can accept the laws as they stand, push them to absurdity, and reveal them for what they have become. They can strip naked, walk out before their fellows, and leave the creditors, and the whole economic edifice they represent, stark naked.

GO THE SECOND MILE

Going the second mile, Jesus' third example, is drawn from the relatively enlightened practice of limiting to a single mile the amount of forced or impressed labor that Roman soldiers could levy on subject peoples. Such compulsory service was a constant feature in Palestine from Persian to late Roman times. Whoever was found on the street could be coerced into service, as was Simon of Cyrene, who was forced to carry Jesus' cross (Mark 15:21). Armies had to be moved with dispatch. Ranking legionnaires bought slaves or donkeys to carry their packs of sixty to eighty-five pounds (not including weapons). The majority of the rank and file, however, had to depend on impressed civilians. Whole villages sometimes fled to avoid being forced to carry soldiers' baggage.

What we have overlooked in this passage is the fact that carrying the pack a second mile is an infraction of military code. With few exceptions, minor infractions were left to the disciplinary control of the centurion (commander of one hundred men). He might fine the offending soldier, flog him, put him on a ration of barley instead of wheat, make him camp outside the fortifications, force him to stand all day before the general's tent holding a clod of dirt in his hands—or, if the offender was a buddy, issue a mild reprimand. But the point is that the soldier does not know what will happen.

It is in this context of Roman military occupation that Jesus speaks. He does not counsel revolt. One does not "befriend" the soldier, draw him aside and drive a knife into his ribs. Jesus was surely aware of the futility of armed insurrection against Roman imperial might; he certainly did nothing to encourage those whose hatred of Rome would soon explode into violence.

But why carry the soldier's pack a second mile? Does this not go to the opposite extreme by aiding and abetting the enemy? Not at all. The question here, as in the two previous instances, is how the oppressed can

recover the initiative and assert their human dignity in a situation that cannot for the time being be changed. The rules are Caesar's, but how one responds to the rules is God's, and Caesar has no power over that.

Imagine, then, the soldier's surprise when, at the next mile marker, he reluctantly reaches to assume his pack, and the civilian says, "Oh, no, let me carry it another mile." Why would he want to do that? What is he up to? Normally, soldiers have to coerce people to carry their packs, but this Jew does so cheerfully, and will not stop'. Is this a provocation? Is he insulting the legionnaire's strength? Being kind? Trying to get him disciplined for seeming to violate the rules of impressment? Will this civilian file a complaint? Create trouble? From a situation of servile impressment, the oppressed have once more seized the initiative. They have taken back the power of choice. They have thrown the soldier off balance by depriving him of the predictability of his victim's response. He has never dealt with such a problem before. Now he must make a decision for which nothing in his previous experience has prepared him. If he has enjoyed feeling superior to the vanquished, he will not enjoy it today. Imagine a Roman infantryman pleading with a Jew to give back his pack! The humor of this scene may have escaped us, but it could scarcely have been lost on Jesus' hearers, who must have been delighted at the prospect of thus discomfiting their oppressors.

Jesus does not encourage Jews to walk a second mile in order to build up merit in heaven, or to be pious, or to kill the soldier with kindness. He is helping an oppressed people find a way to protest and neutralize an onerous practice despised throughout the empire. He is not giving a nonpolitical message of spiritual world transcendence. He is formulating a worldly spirituality in which the people at the bottom of society or under the thumb of imperial power learn to recover their humanity.

One could easily use Jesus' advice vindictively. That is why we must not separate it from the command to love enemies that is integrally connected with it in both Matthew and Luke. But love is not averse to taking the law and using its oppressive momentum to throw the soldier into a region of uncertainty and anxiety that he has never known before.

Such tactics can seldom be repeated. One can imagine that within days after the incidents that Jesus sought to provoke the Powers That Be might pass new laws: penalties for nakedness in court and flogging for carrying a pack more than a mile. One must therefore be creative, improvising new tactics to keep the opponent off balance.

To those whose lifelong pattern has been to cringe before their masters, Jesus offers a way to liberate themselves from servile actions and a servile mentality. And he asserts that they can do this *before* there is a revolution. There is no need to wait until Rome is defeated, peasants have land, or slaves are freed. They can begin to behave with dignity and recovered humanity *now*, even under the unchanged conditions of the old order. Jesus' sense of divine immediacy has social implications. The reign of God is already breaking into the world, and it comes, not as an imposition from on high, but as the leaven slowly causing the dough to rise (Matt. 13:33). Jesus' teaching on nonviolence is thus integral to his proclamation of the dawning of the reign of God. Here was indeed a way to resist the Powers That Be without being made over into their likeness.

Jesus did not endorse armed revolution. It is not hard to see why. In the conditions of first-century Palestine, violent revolution against the Romans would prove catastrophic. But he did lay the foundations for a social revolution, as biblical scholar Richard A. Horsley has pointed out. And a social revolution becomes political when it reaches a critical threshold of acceptance; this in fact did happen to the Roman empire as the Christian church overcame it from below.¹¹

Nor were peasants and slaves in a position to transform the economic system by frontal assault. But they could begin to act from an already recovered dignity and freedom. They could create within the shell of the old society the foundations of God's domination-free order. They could begin living as if the Reign of God were already arriving. To an oppressed people, Jesus is saying, Do not continue to acquiesce in your oppression by the Powers; but do not react violently to it either. Rather, find a third way, a way that is neither submission nor assault, flight nor fight, a way that can secure your human dignity and begin to change the power equation, even now, before the revolution. Turn your cheek, thus indicating to the one who backhands you that his attempts to shame you into servility have failed. Strip naked and parade out of court, thus taking the momentum of the law and the whole debt economy and flipping them, jujitsu-like, in a burlesque of legality. Walk a second mile, surprising the occupation troops by placing them in jeopardy with their superiors. In short, take the law and push it to the point of absurdity. These are, of course, not rules to be followed legalistically, but examples to spark an infinite variety of creative responses in new and changing circumstances. They break the cycle of humiliation with humor and even ridicule, exposing the injustice of the system. They recover for the poor a modicum of initiative that can force the oppressor to see them in a new light.

Jesus is not advocating nonviolence merely as a technique for outwitting the enemy, but as a just means of opposing the enemy in a way that holds open the possibility of the enemy's becoming just also. Both sides must win. We are summoned to pray for our enemies' transformation, and to respond to ill treatment with a love that is not only godly but also from God.

The logic of Jesus' examples in Matthew 5:3 9b-41 goes beyond both inaction and overreaction to a new response, fired in the crucible of love, that promises to liberate the oppressed from evil even as it frees the oppressor from sin. Do not react violently to evil, do not counter evil in kind, do not let evil dictate the terms of your opposition, do not let violence lead you to mirror your opponent—this forms the revolutionary principle that Jesus articulates as the basis for nonviolently engaging the Powers.

Jesus, in short, abhors both passivity and violence. He articulates, out of the history of his own people's struggles, a way by which evil can be opposed without being mirrored, the oppressor resisted without being emulated, and the enemy neutralized without being destroyed. Those who have lived by Jesus' words – Leo Tolstoy, Mohandas Gandhi, Muriel Lester, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, Cesar Chavez, Hildegard and Jean Goss-Mayr, Mairead (Corrigan) Maguire, Adolfo Perez Esquivel, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and countless others less well known – point us to a new way of confronting evil whose potential for personal and social transformation we are only beginning to grasp today.

The following is excerpted from pages 22-23 of Violence and Nonviolence in South Africa: Jesus' Third Way, Walter Wink, 1987.

Some readers may object to the idea of discomfiting the soldier or embarrassing the creditor. But can people who are engaged in oppressive acts repent unless made uncomfortable with their actions? There is, admittedly, the danger of using nonviolence as a tactic of revenge and humiliation. There is also, at the opposite extreme, an equal danger of sentimentality and softness that confuses the uncompromising love of Jesus with being nice. Loving confrontation can free both the oppressed from docility and the oppressor from sin.

Even if nonviolent action does not immediately change the heart of the oppressor, it does affect those committed to it. As Martin Luther King, Jr. attested, it gives them new self-respect, and calls up resources of strength and courage they did not know they had. To 'those who have power, Jesus' advice to the powerless may seem paltry. But to those whose lifelong pattern has been to cringe, bow, and scrape before their masters, and who have internalized their role as inferiors, this small step is momentous. It is comparable to the attempt by black charwomen in South Africa to join together in what will be for some of them an almost insuperable step: to begin calling their employers by their first names.

These three examples amplify what Jesus means in his thesis statement: "Do not violently resist evil (or, one who is evil)." Instead of the two options ingrained in us by millions of years of unreflective, brute response to biological threats from the environment: flight or fight, Jesus offers a third way. This new way marks a historic mutation in human development: the revolt against the principle of natural selection.¹⁵ With Jesus a way emerges by which evil can be opposed without being mirrored:

JESUS' THIRD WAY

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seize the moral initiative • Find a creative alternative to violence • Assert your own humanity and dignity as a person • Meet force with ridicule or humor • Break the cycle of humiliation • Refuse to submit or to accept the inferior position • Expose the injustice of the system • Take control of the power dynamic • Shame the oppressor into repentance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stand your ground • Make the Powers make decisions for which they are not prepared • Recognize your own power • Be willing to suffer rather than retaliate • Force the oppressor to see you in a new light • Deprive the oppressor of a situation where a show of force is effective • Be willing to undergo the penalty of breaking unjust laws • Die to fear of the old order and its rules |
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FLIGHT

Submission
Passivity
Withdrawal
Surrender

FIGHT

Armed revolt
Violent rebellion
Direct retaliation
Revenge

