

Chapter 2

Many of those who have committed their lives to ending injustice simply dismiss Jesus' teachings about nonviolence out of hand as impractical idealism. And with good reason. "Turn the other cheek" suggests the passive, Christian doormat quality that has made so many Christians 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 rather than fostering structural change, encourages collaboration with the oppressor.

Jesus obviously never behaved in any of these ways. Whatever the source of the

misunderstanding, it is clearly in neither Jesus nor his teaching, which, when given a fair hearing in its original social context, is arguably 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 evil-doer. 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 NRSV).

When the court translators working in the hire of King James chose to translate *antistēnai* as “Resist not evil,” they were doing something more than rendering Greek into English. They were translating nonviolent resistance into docility. Jesus did *not* tell his oppressed hearers not to resist evil. That would have been absurd. His entire ministry is utterly at odds with such a preposterous idea. The Greek word

is made up of two parts: *anti*, a word still used in English for “against,” and *histēmi*, a verb that in its noun form (*stasis*) means violent rebellion, armed revolt, sharp dissent. In the Greek Old Testament, *antistēnai* is used primarily for military encounters—44 out of 71 times. It refers specifically to the moment two armies collide, steel on steel, until one side breaks and flees. In the New Testament it describes Barabbas, a rebel “who had committed murder in the *insurrection*” (Mark 15:7; Luke 23:19, 25), and the townspeople in Ephesus, who “are in danger of being charged with *rioting*” (Acts 19:40). The term generally refers to a potentially lethal disturbance or armed revolution.⁶

A proper translation of Jesus’ teaching would then be, “Don’t strike back at evil (or, one who has done you evil) in kind.” “Do not retaliate against violence with violence.” The Scholars Version is brilliant: “Don’t react violently against the one who is evil.” Jesus was no less committed to opposing evil than the anti-Roman resistance fighters. The only

difference was over the means to be used: *how* one should fight evil.

There are three general responses to evil: (1) passivity, (2) violent opposition, and 3) the third way of militant non-violence articulated by Jesus. Human evolution has conditioned us for only the first two of these responses: flight or fight. “Fight” had been the cry of Galileans who had abortively rebelled against Rome only two decades before Jesus spoke. Jesus and many of his hearers would have seen some of the two thousand of their countrymen crucified by the Romans along the roadsides. They would have known some of the inhabitants of Sepphoris (a mere three miles north of Nazareth) who had been sold into slavery for aiding the insurrectionists’ assault on the arsenal there. Some also would live to experience the horrors of the war against Rome in 66–70 C.E., one of the ghestliest in human history.

If the option “fight” had no appeal to them, their only alternative was “flight”: passivity, submission, or, at best, a pas-

sive-aggressive recalcitrance in obeying commands. For them no third way existed. Submission or revolt spelled out the entire vocabulary of their alternatives to oppression.

Now we are in a better position to see why King James' faithful scholars translated *antistēnai* as "resist not." The king would not want people concluding that they had any recourse against his or any other sovereign's unjust policies. Therefore the populace must be made to believe that there are *two* alternatives and only two: flight or fight. Either we resist not or we resist. And Jesus commands 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 translations have meekly followed in that path.

Neither of these alternatives has anything to do with what Jesus is proposing. It is important that we be utterly clear about this point before going on: *Jesus abhors both passivity and violence as responses to evil.* His is a third alternative

not even touched by these options. *Antistēnai* cannot be construed to mean submission.

Jesus clarifies his meaning by three brief examples. “If any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” Why the *right* cheek? How does one strike another on the right cheek anyway? Try it. A blow by the right fist in that right-handed world would land on the *left* cheek of the opponent. To strike the right cheek with the fist would require using the left hand, but in that society the left hand was used only for unclean tasks. Even to gesture with the left hand at Qumran carried the penalty of exclusion and ten days’ penance (The Dead Sea Scrolls, 1QS 7). The only way one could strike the right cheek with the right hand would be with the *back of the right hand*. What we are dealing with here is unmistakably an insult, not a fistfight. The intention is not to injure but to humiliate, to put someone in his or her “place.” One normally did not strike a peer thus, and if one did, the fine was exorbitant (4 zuz was the fine for a blow to a peer with a

fist, 400 zuz for backhanding him; but to an underling, no penalty whatsoever—*Mishnah, Baba Qamma* 8:1-6). A back-hand slap was the normal way of admonishing inferiors. Masters back-handed slaves; husbands, wives; parents, children; men, women; Romans, Jews. *We have here a set of unequal relations, in each of which retaliation would be suicidal.* The only normal response would be cowering submission.

It is important to ask who Jesus' audience is. In every case, Jesus' listeners are not those who strike, initiate lawsuits, or impose forced labor, but their victims ("If anyone strikes *you* . . . would sue *you* . . . forces *you* to go one mile . . ."). There are among his hearers people who were subjected to these very indignities, forced to stifle their inner outrage at the dehumanizing treatment meted out to them by the hierarchical system of caste and class, race and gender, age and status, and as a result of imperial occupation.

Why then does he counsel these already humiliated people to turn the other cheek? Because this action robs the oppressor of

the power to humiliate. The person who turns the other cheek is saying, in effect, "Try again. Your first blow failed to achieve its intended effect. I deny you the power to humiliate me. I am a human being just like you. Your status does not alter that fact. You cannot demean me."

Such a response would create enormous difficulties for the striker. Purely logistically, what can he do? He cannot use the backhand because his nose is in the way. He can't use his left hand regardless. If he hits with a fist, he makes himself an equal, acknowledging the other as a peer. But the whole point of the back of the hand is to reinforce the caste system and its institutionalized inequality. Even if he orders the person flogged, the point has been irrevocably made. The oppressor has been forced, against his will, to regard this subordinate as an equal human being. The powerful person has been stripped of his power to dehumanize the other. This response, far from admonishing passivity and cowardice, is an act of defiance.

The second example Jesus gives is set in a court of law. Someone is being sued for his outer garment.⁷ Who would do that and under what circumstances? The Old Testament provides the clues.

When you make your neighbor a loan of any sort, you shall not go into his house to fetch his pledge. You shall stand outside, and the man to whom you make the loan shall bring the pledge out to you. *And if he is a poor man*, you shall not sleep in his pledge; when the sun goes down, you shall restore to him the pledge that he may sleep in his cloak and bless you. . . . You shall not . . . take a widow's garment in pledge. (Deut. 24:10-13, 17)

Only the poorest of the poor would have nothing but an outer garment to give as collateral for a loan. Jewish law strictly required its return every evening at sunset, for that was all the poor had in which to sleep. The situation to which Jesus alludes is one with which all his hearers

would have been all too familiar: the poor debtor has sunk ever deeper into poverty, the debt cannot be repaid, and his creditor has hauled him into court to try to seize his property by legal means.

Indebtedness was the most serious social problem in first-century Palestine. Jesus' parables are full of debtors struggling to salvage their lives. The situation was not, however, a natural calamity that had overtaken the incompetent. It was the direct consequence of Roman imperial policy. Emperors taxed the wealthy ruthlessly to fund their wars. Naturally, the rich sought non-liquid investments to secure their wealth. Land was best, but there was a problem: it was not bought and sold on the open market as today but was ancestrally owned and passed down over generations. Little land was ever for sale, in Palestine at least. Exorbitant interest, however, could be used to drive landowners into ever deeper debt until they were forced to sell their land. By the time of Jesus we see this process already far advanced: large estates (*latifundia*) owned by absentee landlords, managed