

by stewards, and worked by servants, sharecroppers, and day laborers. 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 in this context 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 inner garment as well? This would mean stripping off all their clothing and marching out of court stark naked! Put yourself in the debtor's place, and imagine the chuckles this saying must have evoked. There stands the creditor, beet-red with embarrassment, your outer garment in one hand, your underwear in the other. You have suddenly turned the tables on him. You had no hope of winning the trial; the law was entirely in his favor. But you have refused to be humiliated, and at the same

time you have registered a stunning protest against a system that spawns such debt. You have 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?"

Nakedness was taboo in Judaism, and shame fell not on the naked party, but on the person viewing or causing one's nakedness (Gen. 9:20-27). By stripping you have brought the creditor under the same prohibition that led to the curse of Canaan. As you parade into the street, your friends and neighbors, startled, aghast, inquire what happened. You explain. They join your growing procession, which now resembles a victory parade. The entire system by which debtors are oppressed has been publicly unmasked. The creditor is revealed to be not a "respectable" moneylender but a party in the reduction of an entire social class to landlessness and destitution. This unmasking is not simply punitive, however; it offers the creditor a chance to see, perhaps for the first time in his life, what his practices cause, and to repent. Far from

collaborating in injustice, the poor man has used the law, aikido-like, to make an exploitative law a laughing stock.

Jesus in effect is sponsoring clowning. In so doing he carries on a venerable tradition in Judaism. As a later saying of the Talmud runs, "If your neighbor calls you an ass, put a saddle on your back."<sup>8</sup>

The Powers That Be literally stand on their dignity. Nothing depotentiates them faster 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 possible. This message, far from being a counsel of perfection unattainable in this life, is a practical, strategic measure for empowering the oppressed. It provides a hint of how to take on the entire system in a way that unmasks its essential cruelty and to burlesque its pretensions to justice, law, and order. Here is a poor man who will no longer be treated as a sponge to be squeezed dry by the rich. He accepts the laws as they stand, pushes them to the point of absurdity, and reveals them for what they really are. He strips nude,

walks out before his compatriots, and leaves the creditor and the whole economic edifice he represents, stark naked.

Under the apartheid regime in South Africa, the authorities had for a long time sought a way to destroy a particular shantytown, without success. Then one day, after most of the men and women had left for work, the army arrived. The soldiers announced that the few women there had five minutes to gather their things and then the bulldozers would commence to work. The women, perhaps sensing the prudery of the farm boys who largely made up the army, stood in front of the bulldozers and stripped off all their clothes. The army fled.

Was Johan Stander, the renegade South African nationalist businessman, thinking of this passage, or was he just fed up, when he removed his trousers in front of the Port Elizabeth city hall in April 1986, while demonstrating against apartheid?<sup>9</sup>

Jesus' third example, the one about going the second mile, is drawn from the very enlightened practice of limiting the

amount of forced labor that Roman soldiers could levy on subject peoples. Jews would have seldom encountered legionnaires except in time of war or insurrection. It would have been auxiliaries who were headquartered in Judea, paid at half the rate of legionnaires and rather a scruffy bunch. In Galilee, Herod Antipas maintained an army patterned after Rome's; presumably it also had the right to impose labor. Mile markers were placed regularly beside the highways. A soldier could impress a civilian to carry his pack one mile only; to force the civilian to go farther carried with it severe penalties under military law. In this way Rome attempted to limit the anger of the occupied people and still keep its armies on the move. Nevertheless, this levy was a bitter reminder to the Jews that they were a subject people even in the Promised Land.

To this proud but subjugated people Jesus does not counsel revolt. One does not "befriend" the soldier, draw him aside, and drive a knife into his ribs. Jesus was keenly aware of the futility of

armed revolt against Roman imperial might and minced no words about it, though it must have cost him support from the revolutionary factions.

But why walk the second mile? Is this not to rebound to the opposite extreme: 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, how they can assert their human dignity in a situation that cannot for the time being be changed. The rules are Caesar's, but not how one responds to the rules—that 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 (sixty-five to eighty-five pounds in full gear), and you say, "Oh no, let me carry it another mile." Why would you do that? What are you up to? Normally he has to coerce your kinsmen to carry his pack, and now you do it cheerfully and *will not stop!* Is this a provocation? Are you insulting his strength? Being kind? Trying to get him disciplined for seeming to

make you go farther than you should? Are you planning to file a complaint? Create trouble?

From a situation of servile impressions, you have once more seized the initiative. You have taken back the power of choice. The soldier is thrown off-balance by being deprived of the predictability of your response. He has never dealt with such a problem before. Now you have forced him into making 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 the hilarious situation of a Roman infantryman pleading with a Jew, "Aw, come on, please give me back my pack!" The humor of this scene may escape those who picture it through sanctimonious eyes, but it could scarcely have been lost on Jesus' hearers, who must have been regaled at the prospect of thus discomfiting their oppressors.

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

they are 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 would 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: “Don’t react violently against the 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.<sup>10</sup> With Jesus a way emerges by which evil can be opposed without being mirrored:

### Jesus’ Third Way

- 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

- Stand your ground
- Force the Powers to make decisions for which they are not prepared
- Recognize your own power
- Be willing to suffer rather than to retaliate
- Cause 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 for breaking unjust laws
- Die to fear of the old order and its rules

Flight

Submission

Passivity

Withdrawal

Surrender

Fight

Armed revolt

Violent rebellion

Direct retaliation

Revenge

It is too bad that Jesus did not provide fifteen or twenty further examples, since we do not tend toward this new response naturally. Some examples from political history might help engrave it more deeply in our minds.