

Nathan Brown
"American Christianity: Celebration and Confession"
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West Side Christian Church

Matthew 5:38-48

Fighting is a Christian response. That's right, I said it. Resistance, confrontation, opposition, conflict: all of these are defiant responses. All of these are Christian responses. We are called together, as people of faith, to fight against evil.

So what do we do with this particular section of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount we have read this morning? Let's be honest, those who oppose any kind of conflict use this particular passage to justify their beliefs. For centuries, Christians have struggled to know what to do with this passage because it seems so passive, not to mention unrealistic. It has begged the question, "Does Jesus tell us not to stand up for ourselves?"

Jesus says, "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." What more can we get from these words than the fact that we are to be non-resistant? What more can be interpreted by Jesus' commands than the fact that we are to submit to those who oppress us?

Here's the problem with our common interpretation of this passage: there is perhaps no more resistant figure in all of history than Jesus Christ. Every fiber in his being, every act of ministry, every word he spoke was in defiance to the Roman Empire and the way of life that had come to be under Rome's iron fist. Jesus fought evil every time he encountered it.

Before going any further this morning, I need to give credit to the Old Testament Scholar, Dr. Walter Wink, from whose work I have drawn for the Biblical interpretation you are about to hear. Much of the exegetical work I will describe comes from an article he wrote entitled, "The Third Way." Bear with me for a few moments while I dig beneath the surface of this text.

Instead of giving us three examples of passivity in our reading this morning, Jesus gives us three examples of how to fight. The first of these is, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also."

Imagine if I were your assailant and I were to strike a blow with my right fist at your face, which cheek would it land on? It would be the left. It is the wrong cheek in terms of the text we are looking at. Jesus says, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek..." I could hit you on the right cheek if I used a left hook, but that would be impossible in Semitic society because the left hand was used only for unclean

tasks. You couldn't even gesture with your left hand in public. The only way I could hit you on the right cheek would be with the back of the hand.

Now the back of the hand is not a blow intended to injure. It is a symbolic blow. It is intended to put you back where you belong. It is always from a position of power or superiority. The back of the hand was given by a master to a slave or by a husband to a wife or by a parent to a child or a Roman to a Jew in that period. In effect, Jesus is saying, "When someone tries to humiliate you and put you down, back into your social location which is inferior to that person, turn your other cheek."

Now in the process of turning in that direction, if you turned your head to the right, I could no longer backhand you. Your nose is now in the way. Furthermore, you can't backhand someone twice. It's like telling a joke a second time. If it doesn't work the first time, it has failed.

By turning the other cheek, you are defiantly saying to the master, "I refuse to be humiliated by you any longer. I am a human being just like you. I am a child of God. You can't put me down even if you have me killed." This is clearly no way to avoid trouble. The master might have you flogged within an inch of your life, but he will never be able to assert that you have no dignity.

The second instance Jesus gives is, "If anyone takes you to court and sues you for your outer garment, give your undergarment as well." The situation here is dealing with collateral for a loan. If a person was trying to get a loan, normally they would use animals or land as collateral for the loan, but the very poorest of the poor, according to Deuteronomy 24:10-13, could use their outer garment as collateral. It was the long robe that they used to sleep in at night and used as an overcoat by day. The creditor had to return this garment every night, but could come get it every morning and thus harass the debtor and hopefully get him to repay.

Jesus' audience is made up of debtors -- "If anyone takes you to court..." He is talking to the very people who know they are going to be dragged into court for indebtedness and they know also that the law is on the side of the wealthy. They are never going to win a case. So Jesus says to them, "Okay, you are not going to win the case. So take the law and with jujitsu-like finesse and throw it into a point of absurdity. When your creditor sues you for your outer garment, give your undergarment as well."

They didn't have underwear in those days. That meant taking off the only stitch of clothing you had left on you and standing nude, naked, in court. As the story of Jonah reminds us, nakedness was taboo in Israel. However, the shame of nakedness fell not on the person who was naked, but on the person who observed their nakedness. The creditor is being put in the position of being shamed by the nakedness of the debtor. Imagine the debtor leaving the courtroom, walking out in

the street and all of his friends coming and seeing him in all his glory and saying, "What happened to you?"

He says, "That creditor has got all my clothes," and starts walking down to his house. People are coming out of bazaars and alleys, "What happened? What happened?" Everyone is talking about it and chattering and falling in behind him, fifty-hundred people marching down in this little demonstration toward his house. You can imagine it is going to be some time, in that village, before any creditor takes anybody else to court.

Jesus' third example is, "If one of the occupation troops forces you to carry his pack one mile, carry it two." Now these packs weighed 65 to 85 pounds, not counting weapons. These soldiers had to move quickly to get to the borders where trouble had broken out. The military law made it permissible for a soldier to grab a civilian and force the civilian to carry the pack, but only one mile. There were mile markers on every Roman road.

If -- and this is the part we have left out -- the civilian were forced to carry the pack more than one mile, the soldier was in infraction of military code, and military code was always more strictly enforced than civilian. So Jesus is saying, "All right. The next time the soldier forces you to carry his pack, cooperate. Carry it and then when you come to the mile marker, keep going."

The soldier suddenly finds himself in a position he has never been in before. He has always known before exactly what you would do. You would mutter and you would complain, but you would carry it. As soon as the mile marker came, you would drop it. Suddenly, this person is carrying the pack on. The soldier doesn't know why, but he also knows that he is in infraction of military law and if his centurion finds out about this, he is in deep trouble.¹

What Jesus has done in this passage from the Sermon on the Mount is not to encourage passivity. No, what he has done is teach his followers how to fight back—how to resist the evil forces of our world. However, if you notice, there is one significant difference between the way Jesus teaches his followers to fight and the way that we humans typically fight. Jesus never uses violence.

Over and over again in the gospels, while Jesus reinforces his belief that resistance is a faithful response, violence is not. Violence is the work of Rome. Violence is the work of evil. And as Paul says in Romans 12, "Do not return evil for evil."

In other words, Jesus says to us this morning, do not resist evil on its own terms. Don't let your opponent dictate the conditions of your opposition. If I have a

¹ Wink, Dr. Walter. "The Third Way." *The Chicago Sunday Evening Club: 30 Good Minutes*. 1993.

hoe and my opponent has a rifle, I am obviously going to have to get a rifle in order to fight on equal terms, but then my opponent gets a machine gun, so I have to get a machine gun. You have a spiral of violence that is unending. There is truth in the old adage, "Violence begets violence."²

This weekend we celebrated our Nation's independence. There are freedoms and liberties in this country that we need to acknowledge and celebrate. It is true that each one of us is fortunate to live in a country in which we are given the choice of what God to worship and how to worship that God. Hear me say: there is much to celebrate on the 4th of July!

Nevertheless, as people who follow Jesus Christ, as the church, our first allegiance is not to our country, but to our God. Our most important values are not those of our government, but those of our Lord and Savior. In fact, more often than we care to admit, the values of our faith come into conflict with the values of our culture. One of these conflicting values is our belief in the continual use of violence. This value manifests at every level of our society.

We teach our children that if the bully on the playground hits you, you should hit him back. Anymore, graphic violence is so commonplace in video games, television, and film that we are numb to it. We make it easy for citizens to own assault weapons, which are the means by which most violence is perpetrated on our streets. We employ the death penalty, which is predicated on the law Jesus is combating in this passage, "an eye for an eye." We have more military might to defend ourselves than any other nation in the world.

Violence is woven into the fabric of American society because it is a significant part of our history. Violence is the means by which we gained our independence. Violence is the means by which we have maintained our independence. We used violence to control Native Americans as we claimed this land. We used violence against African Americans, through slavery, in order to build this country.

We are who we are today because we have accepted violence as a necessary evil. The church has often times agreed with this assessment. However, as the church, it is our calling to witness not only to our government, but to the world, the values of Jesus Christ—one of those values being resistance, non-violently.

As I read back over the three examples Jesus gives his followers for resisting non-violently, I am struck by how Jesus follows his own commands as he journeys toward his violent end: the cross. He is beaten (turn the other cheek), he is stripped of his clothing (give your under garment as well), and he carries his own cross, as he walks along side the Roman soldiers (carry it an extra mile).

² Ibid.

In journeying toward the cross the way that he did, Jesus defies his oppressors, and in his death, he changes the most feared, violent symbol of the first century into a symbol of hope, love, and an end to all evil.

As we celebrate our independence this weekend and all the freedoms that come with that gift, I hope that as the Church in America, we might also confess our complicity in the sin of violence, throughout our country's history, and repent for that sin by offering new, creative, faithful ways by which not only Americans, but all human beings might resist evil in the world.

Most of us will say that there are only two ways to respond to evil—to extinguish it with violence or pursue it with diplomacy. Jesus offers an alternative. He says we are called to fight evil in this world, to battle it to the bitter end—but we must do everything in our power to do so, non-violently.

Amen.