

Holy Textures

Meeting Jesus in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.
Short, easy to use, faith-provoking insights.



Matthew 5:38-48

*Matthew 5:38-41 has a tragic history of poor translations and even worse interpretations. This passage is **NOT** recommending becoming a doormat; nor does it tolerate domestic violence. The translation, 'Do not resist an evildoer' fails to convey the full meaning of the underlying Greek. It would be better translated as, 'Do not violently resist an evildoer.' Thus the teaching is primarily about non-violence. It is not about acquiescing to evil. Jesus then goes on to offer three quick examples of how to non-violently resist an evildoer.*



Year A

Epiphany 7

February 23, 2014

Sunday Between February 18 and February 24 Inclusive

Not used if assigned date follows Ash Wednesday.

May be replaced by Transfiguration Sunday if the assigned date is the last Sunday before Ash Wednesday.

Read the passage at the bottom of this post: [Matthew 5:38-48, The Message](#) or [Matthew 5:38-48, The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

Click [here](#) for an easy to print or email Adobe PDF version of this note.

Sermon by the [Rev. Dr. George Hermanson](#), "To be added."

Matthew 5:38-48 is part of [Sermon on the Mount](#). See my post, [Sermon on the Mount, Matthew, Chapters 5, 6, and 7](#), for an short overview of these chapters.

The sermon ends with a teaching from Jesus about a difference between those who are wise and those who are foolish:

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell--and great was its fall!

Matthew 7:24-27 (NRSV)

What is the crucial difference between the one who is wise and the one who is foolish?

It has nothing to do with what we usually associate with wisdom: knowledge, many years of experience, perspective, intelligence, insight, etc.

Nor does it have to do with **HEARING** what Jesus has said. Both cases begin - "Everyone who hears these words of mine ..."

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The difference between being either wise or foolish is in **ACTING** or **NOT** acting.

It is not enough for us to hear these words of Jesus; to study them; to be inspired by them; to have hopes / aspirations / dreams based on them. We must **ACT** on them; practice them; live them in our everyday lives.

So whatever passage we read from the Sermon on the Mount, we must hear it with one question in mind:

*What must I **DO** to make this the bedrock of how I live?*

Matthew 5:38-41 has a tragic history of poor translations and even worse interpretations.

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.

This passage is **NOT** recommending becoming a doormat; nor does it tolerate domestic violence.

First of all, the translation, "Do not resist an evildoer" fails to convey the full meaning of the underlying Greek. It would be better translated as, "Do not **violently** resist an evildoer." Thus the teaching is primarily about non-violence. It is not about acquiescing to evil.

Jesus then goes on to offer three quick examples of how to non-violently resist an evildoer - in fact, of how to publicly shame and mock an evildoer.

These passages are tragically mis-interpreted because we have forgotten the original society in which Jesus gave these teachings. When Jesus says, "If anyone ..." he and his listeners knew instantly and exactly who that "anyone" was. The behaviours Jesus describes - slapping the right cheek; suing; forcing to go a mile - were not the kind of things "anyone" could do. They were the kind of things only a privileged few could do - and did - to the crowds who were listening to Jesus.

- **Slapping the right cheek.** This was done by Masters to their servants and slaves. It was always done by hitting with the back of the right hand across the right cheek. The blow was about asserting status and power over the other. This is not about random violence or fighting among friends or enemies. It is about rank, privilege and power.

And to preserve one's honour - one's public standing - it is crucial everything must be done according to the socially accepted protocols. The slave must obediently stand facing you without external coercion. You must strike only the right cheek; and only with the back of the right hand. Any variation on this would demonstrate

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that you were not in control; would be a public loss of face.

Now imagine your overlord has just slapped you on your right cheek, and without saying a word you silently turn your head to expose your left cheek. It appears that you are becoming doubly subservient; doubly accepting your master's authority over you. But you are actually rendering your master powerless!

Turning your head hides your right cheek and presents your left cheek. But the angle of your head will be such that the master can see, but cannot strike your left cheek *with the back of his right hand*. Try this with a friend and you'll see what happens.

Doing this would publicly expose the master to shame and ridicule. You would appear to be meek and servile; obediently waiting for a second blow. But the Master would be totally helpless. His only options would be to hit you with the *palm* of his right hand, or use his left hand, or walk away. All three would cause him to lose face.

- **Sue you.** Peasants did not sue one another. Again this is about the privileged abusing the poor. Since peasants quite literally only owned the clothes on their backs, being sued for your coat was being sued for the only thing you owned - except for your underwear! Which is what a "cloak" means. Being seen in your underwear is shameful for you. So why not publicly expose the shame which allows someone with wealth and privilege to take away the only thing a poor person owns by going naked! Give him your underwear. Let him explain why you are naked.
- **Forced to go a mile.** Soldiers were allowed to conscript civilians to carry their packs, but only for a mile. However, this was no minor inconvenience for anyone who worked and fed their family day by day. Walking a mile with a heavy pack and then back again would mean missing that day's labour, and therefore that day's food for the family. Offering to go a second mile publicly exposes the unjust hardship of being forced to go even one mile, but does so in a way that seems to cooperate while at the same time brings shame and ridicule on the ones doing the forcing.

Verse 42 - Begging and Borrowing. Then, as now, begging and borrowing were complex social interactions that involve negotiating honour and shame, social respect and status, and money. Notice that the teaching here is directed to those who have - and not to the have-nots. The effect of this is to break down the

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customary social barriers between those who have and those who do not. It changes the social relationship to one of kinship. Jesus is telling us to treat beggars and borrowers as if they were our closest family.

Verses 43 to 48 - Attachment to All. (*Verse 42 above actually introduces the theme elaborated in these verses, and so the paragraph break should come at Verse 41.*)

Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh (Page 380; see footnote below.) once again helpfully comment that at the time of Jesus "love" and "hate" were **NOT** understood in terms of internal emotional states, feelings, or attitudes. Jesus is not asking us to "feel the love" toward our enemies.

Persons (at the time of Jesus) had little concern for things psychological. ...words referring to an internal state always connote a corresponding external expression as well. For example ... "to covet" always involved the attempt to take what one desired, hence the word is best translated "to steal."

And so "to love" our enemies does **NOT** mean to try and feel affection for them.

It means to be attached to them; to be devoted to them; to be loyal to them; to be bonded with them; to join one's fate with theirs; to seek for their welfare, their fair and just treatment. And to behave outwardly in ways that correspond with our inner attachment.

Yikes. Maybe it would be easier to try and merely like our enemies.

However, as Jesus points out, God treats God's enemies - the evil and the unrighteous - the same as God's friends - the good and the righteous. Ought we not do the same?

And if we are kind only to those we are close to, aren't we simply repeating what those we hate also do? Where's the merit in doing that?

As others have already said about this passage: There is no path to love; love is the path.

I like the way Eugene Peterson's, *The Message* (see below), sums this up:

In a word, what I'm saying is, Grow up. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.

David Ewart,

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Historical background information in this post is drawn primarily from Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, see link below, pages 46-47, 380-81.

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* [Link to Amazon.com Bibliography for Bruce Malina, Richard Rohrbaugh, et. al.](#), Social Science Commentary on ... The Synoptic Gospels; The Gospel of John; The Book of Acts; The Letters of Paul; The Book of Revelation; and others.

Matthew 5:38-48 (NRSV)

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;⁴⁰ and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well;⁴¹ and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.⁴² Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

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Matthew 5:38-48 (The Message)

³⁸ "Here's another old saying that deserves a second look: 'Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.'³⁹ Is that going to get us anywhere? Here's what I propose: 'Don't hit back at all.' If someone strikes you, stand there and take it.⁴⁰ If someone drags you into court and sues for the shirt off your back, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it.⁴¹ And if someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life.⁴² No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.

⁴³ "You're familiar with the old written law, 'Love your friend,' and its unwritten companion, 'Hate your enemy.'⁴⁴ I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer,⁴⁵ for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty.⁴⁶ If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that.⁴⁷ If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that.

⁴⁸ "In a word, what I'm saying is, Grow up. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.

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