

Holy Textures

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

Turn The Other Cheek - Nonviolent Resistance To Violence

Matthew 5:38-41,

Publicly Expose and Mock Injustice

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

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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.

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