

Resistance 101
February 23, 2014

Matthew 5:38-48

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 one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; 40 and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; 41 and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. 42 Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would 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 sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

I had a good friend who as many of us do seemed to find the love of her life in college. They were seemingly happy until we who were her friends started to notice a change in her, She was not the same girl we knew and loved she started to withdraw and then one day we saw a bruise on her cheek, about a week later she had a bruise on her other cheek. We finally as a group confronted her. Some of us had been there before. Yet she was a bible believer, and pulled this verse out at us, in our college mindset we could not go against the words of scripture and what could we say when she looked at us and said but I am turning the other cheek, we had nothing to combat the level of martyrdom being asked of in this verse.

This has to be one of the most misunderstood passages of the bible. It is under the title Concerning Retaliation, Or an Eye for an Eye and Love for Enemies and it seems to at first read fit with the rest of what we know of Jesus' teachings surrounding forgiveness and being an example of love through forgiveness of others misdeeds to us. We learn to forgive 70x 7 so why would we not also turn our cheeks to those who strike out against us, or walk the extra mile in another's shoes?

See this passage is not what it seems to be when we first here the words. This passage has generally been understood by people as teaching non-resistance. Do not resist one who is evil has been taken to mean simply let them run all over you. Give up all concern for your own justice. If they hit you on one cheek, turn the other and let them batter you there too, As far as the soldier forcing you to take his pack an extra mile, well are you doing that voluntarily? It has become a platitude meaning extend yourself to the point of breaking yourself.

Jesus could not have meant those kinds of things. He resisted evil with every fiber of His being. There is not a single instance in which Jesus does not resist evil when He encounters it. The problem begins right there with the word resist. The Greek term is antistenai. Anti is familiar to us in English still, "against," "Anti"-Defamation League. Stenai means to stand. So, "stand against." Resist is not a mistranslation so much as an undertranslation. What has been overlooked is the degree to which antistenai is used in the Old Testament in the vast majority of cases as a technical term for warfare. To "stand against" refers to the marching of the two armies up against each other until they actually collide with one another and the battle ensues. That is called "taking a stand."

The image there is not of a punch drunk boxer somehow managing to stay on his feet even though he is being pummeled by his adversary. It is to keep on fighting. Do not retreat. Do not give up. Do not turn your back and flee but stay in there and fight to the bitter end.

When Jesus says, "Do not resist one who is evil," there is something stronger than simply resist. It is do not resist violently. Jesus is indicating do not resist evil on its own terms. Do not let your opponent dictate the terms of your opposition. If I have a 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.

Jesus is trying to break that spiral of violence. Do not resist one who is evil probably means something like, do not turn into the very thing you hate. Do not become what you oppose. The earliest translation of this is probably in a version of Romans 12 where Paul says, "Do not return evil for evil."

Jesus gives three examples of what He means by not returning evil for evil. 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 could not 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. What Jesus is saying is in effect, "When someone tries to humiliate you and put you down, back into your social location which is inferior to that person, and 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 not backhand someone twice. It is like telling a joke a second time. If it does not 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 not 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 hock their outer garment. 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, throw it into a point of absurdity. When your creditor sues you for your outer garment, give your undergarment as well."

They did not 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 not only taboo in Israel. 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 his all-togethers 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.

What Jesus is showing us in these two examples so far is that you do not have to wait for a utopian revolution to come along before you can start living humanly. You can begin living humanly now under the conditions of the old order. The kingdom of God is breaking into the myths of these people now, the moment they begin living the life of the future, the kingdom of God.

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 does not 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. Jesus is teaching these people how to take the initiative away from their oppressors and within the situation of that old order, find a new way of being.

So how do we take our stand for our faith? How do we stand up strong against the oppressions of society and instead of allowing ourselves to be battered down and submissive to what society dictates and where society places our Christian faith? We stand against it and stand strong in our faith in God. We might not have the same laws in place now but we can certainly take a page out of Jesus lesson on Resistance 101. Amen.