

# Hard Sayings of Jesus: On Retaliation

## Matthew 5:38-45

"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. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 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.

## SERMON

The Old Testament rule of an “eye for an eye” was, strange as it may seem to us, a huge step forward in resolving disputes. It was intended to set strict limits on the deemed right to retaliate. If someone from another tribe wronged an individual, it could easily escalate into inter-tribal war. If your neighbour wronged you, this could result in a long-term feud which greatly exaggerated the initial injury. Instead, this “eye for an eye” law was intended to curtail wrongs as quickly as possible in a *judicial* manner – not by *personal revenge*. By the time of Jesus’ day, the Jewish law had further restricted the penalty by substituting monetary compensation instead of physically ‘losing your eye’.

This is the context and mindset within which Jesus is functioning.

Who is the audience for these sayings? Since this is from the Sermon on the Mount, the listeners are the general interested followers of Jesus. This is not a private conversation to his closest disciples. What he is saying is for public consumption – a new way of living in the world. Furthermore, Jesus assumes that his audience are the *victims*, not the victimizers. It is taken for granted that such victimizing behavior is foreign to those who live under the reign of God.

At face value, Jesus’ teaching is far more radical than the Old Testament law, in that he is challenging his followers to renounce their right to retaliation. Some people interpret this passage as saying “let the oppressor have his way and leave vengeance to God”.

Many otherwise devout Christians simply dismiss Jesus’ teaching about “not resisting an evil doer” as impractical idealism. And with good reason, because “to turn the other cheek” has come to imply or passive doormat-like quality that makes the Christian way seem cowardly and complicit in the face of injustice. Jesus teaching, viewed in this way, may seem even suicidal - an invitation to bullies and to spouse batterers.

Whether we like it or not, that is what the Jesus *appears* to be saying and this is why it is a “hard saying”. How do we apply this on a personal or national scale today – indeed should we even try it?

The idea of non-resistance was taken seriously by the early Church. You could argue this is evidenced by the martyrs in times of persecution, beginning with Stephen in Acts. Indeed the influential St Augustine agreed that the gospel teaches non-resistance and therefore he said that a Christian must not attempt self-defense. He said this after the time of Emperor Constantine, after Christianity had become the official State religion. Augustine went on to argue that if someone is attacking *my neighbor*, however, then the love Commandment requires me to defend my neighbor by force of arms if necessary. With that Augustine opened the door to Just War theory, leading to the case for a justifiable war to protect the God-given State.

Is there a better way to understand this hard saying of Jesus? Yes – I think so, and I acknowledge theologian Walter Wink for these insights that I share today. He argues that the gospel does not, in fact, teach nonresistance to evil, rather Jesus counsels’ resistance but *without violence*. Jesus is *not* telling us to submit to evil, but *to refuse to oppose it on its own terms*. We are not to let the opposition dictate the methods of *our* opposition. He is urging us to transcend *both* passivity *and* violence by discovering a third way that is both assertive and yet nonviolent. In that, NT Wright’s translation of Matthew 5:39 is much better, namely: “do not use violence to resist evil”.

Let’s consider the three examples Jesus gives.

Matthew writes: “if anyone strikes you on the right cheek turn the other also”.

If you were to use your fist and hit somebody in front of you with your *right* hand, then that blow would fall on their *left* cheek. To hit someone on the right cheek would require you to use your left fist; but in that culture that action would be taboo because your left hand can only be used for unclean tasks. The only way that you can hit someone on their *right* cheek with your right hand is to use a *backhanded* blow. The backhand was not used to injure you, but to insult you, to humiliate and degrade you. It was not administered to an *equal* but to an *inferior*. Masters backhanded their slaves, husband their wives, parents their children, and Romans the Jews.

“If anyone strikes you” Jesus said - and these people were used to being degraded - he asked them to refuse it to accept this kind of treatment anymore. If they backhand you, turn the other cheek. Think about this a little further; by turning the other cheek makes it impossible for the master to use the backhand again. The left cheek now offers the perfect target for a blow with the right fist. Only people who are socially equal fought with fists. The last thing that the master wishes to do to establish the underlings’ equality. This non-violent act of defiance renders the master incapable of asserting his dominance in the relationship. By turning the other cheek the inferior person is saying “I am a human being just like you and I refuse to be humiliated any longer. I am your equal, I am a child of God and I will not take it anymore.”

Such defiance is no way to avoid trouble. Meek acquiescence is what the master wants, and this 'cheeky' behavior may call for a flogging or worse. But the point has been made; the superior person has been rendered impotent to instill shame on the subordinate. His power to dehumanize the other person has been stripped away. Gandhi taught "the first principle of non-violent action is that of non-cooperation with everything humiliating".

This is different from the view that when we turn the other cheek, the batterer can simply clobber us again! How often has this interpretation been fed to battered wives and abused children? That was never Jesus' intention. To such victims he advises "stand up for yourself, assert your humanity - but don't answer the oppressor in kind. Find a new third way that is neither cowardly submission nor violent reprisal".

In Jesus' second example of assertive nonviolence is set in a court of law. A creditor has taken a poor man to court over an unpaid loan. Only the poorest of the poor were subjected to such treatment and Deuteronomy 24:10-13 stipulates the process. The creditor could take the debtor's outer robe as collateral for a loan, but it had to be returned each evening so the poor man could have something with which to sleep.

Being in debt was a plague in the first century Palestine. Jesus' parables are full of debtors struggling to salvage their lives. Heavy debt was not a calamity that had overtaken the weak; rather, it was a direct consequence of Roman imperial policy to tax the wealthy, which was always then passed down to *their* tenants and slaves.

Why does Jesus counsel to give over their undergarments as well? It would mean stripping off all their clothing and marching out of the court naked! Nakedness was taboo in Judaism and shame fell less on the naked party than the person viewing or causing the nakedness. By stripping the debtor has brought shame on the creditor.

Imagine the chuckles this saying must have evoked! There stands the creditor covered with shame with the poor debtors robe in one hand and the debtor's undergarments in the other. The tables have suddenly being turned on the creditor. The debtor had no hope of beating the system; the case law was entirely in the creditor's favor. But the poor man has transcended this attempt to humiliate him. He has risen above the shame and at the same time he has registered a stunning protest against the system. He has said, in effect, "You want my robe? Here take everything. Now you have got all that I have except my body. Is that what you will take next? It is a radical teaching!

'Going the second mile' is Jesus' third example and is drawn from the practice that limited to a single mile (a Roman unit of length, by the way) the amount of forced or impressed labour that Roman soldiers could levy on subject peoples. Such compulsory service was a constant feature in Palestine from Persian to late Roman times. Whoever was found on the street could be coerced into service, as

was Simon of Cyrene, who was forced to carry Jesus' cross. Sometimes whole villages fled to avoid being forced into carrying a travelling army's baggage.

What is often overlooked is that to carry the pack for a *second* mile is an infraction of military code and subject to disciplinary action. The Roman army was highly disciplined; his centurion might fine the offending soldier, or put him on rations, or force him to make camp outside the fortifications. It is in this context of Roman military occupation that Jesus speaks. Jesus does not advise revolt; he is fully aware of the futility of armed insurrection against Rome and he certainly did nothing to encourage those whose hatred of Rome would soon explode into violence.

This is significant as Jesus was thought to be a potential messianic figure and people wanted to know if they should throw their weight behind him as a political saviour. The instruction of "going the second mile" might at first glance make a freedom fighter in the audience regard Jesus as traitor.

So why carry the soldier's pack for a second mile? The soldier would be surprised when the civilian says "let me carry it another mile" and would think "why? What is he up to?" Soldiers normally have to coerce people! But he could not say thanks very much and allow the person to actually do the second mile. Imagine the Roman infantryman pleading with the person to give back his pack otherwise he might get into trouble with his superior officer. The humor of this scene may have escaped us, but would scarcely have been lost on Jesus hearers!

Jesus doesn't encourage Jews to walk a second mile in order to build up merit in heaven, or be thought of as pious, or to overwhelm the soldier with kindness. Jesus is helping oppressed people find a way to protest and neutralize this onerous practice despised throughout the empire. He is not giving a non-political message of spiritual transcendence; he is teaching them how to recover their humanity – their dignity.

In summary Jesus is saying to oppressed people "do not continue to acquiesce to your oppression, but do not react violently either. Find another way, a way that is neither submission nor assault. All three examples have an element of absurdity, of pushing things to the extreme. But by doing so, you break the cycle of humiliation with humor, with ridicule, exposing the injustice of the system. In short, Jesus abhors both passivity and violence. He wants a way by which evil can be opposed without being mirrored, oppressors being resisted without being emulated, and the enemy neutralized without being destroyed.

To be fair, Jesus' teaching presupposes a strong sense of honour and shame within a cultural system. We can ask ourselves would this approach work in today's society; many would say no. Those who opposed Gandhi still had a concern for holiness and the spiritual, and British rule was based Christian principles. Some have said that if you put Gandhi in Russia at the time of the revolution or in Nazi Germany, he would never have been heard of again.

On the other hand, we have to ask ourselves has paying back violence with violence produced lasting peace? Has this occurred at an international level, or in our workplace and homes. I would say: No. As we listen to the news daily, we live with the frustrating treadmill of violence that seems to achieve nothing. We long for a better way – yet the traditional interpretation of “not resisting the evil doer” is not the solution. I think this new interpretation of this “hard saying” – of resistance without violence, of refusing to oppose evil on its own terms – provides a way of hope, but it is still hard to implement. Jesus gave examples relevant for his day; we need to be imaginative as to how we seek to apply this principle today.

And as we wrestle with this hard saying of Jesus; let us remember one thing for sure: In this saying Jesus is not *encouraging* injustice. Furthermore, *victims* of abuse should *not* view this passage as justification to simply absorb abuse, thinking that in doing so it somehow pleases God. This may be done for the best of motives, but it is nevertheless misguided. Perpetuating injustice is not a God honouring solution for people made in God’s image.

**Let us pray.**