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Jesus and Nonviolence

A Third Way

Walter Wink

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Chapter 2

Many of those who have committed their lives to ending injustice simply dismiss Jesus' teachings about non-violence out of hand as impractical idealism. And with good reason. "Turn the other cheek" suggests the passive, Christian doormat quality that has made so many Christians cowardly and complicit in the face of injustice. "Resist not evil" seems to break the back of all opposition to evil and to counsel submission. "Going the second mile" has become a platitude meaning nothing more than "extend yourself," and rather than fostering structural change, encourages collaboration with the oppressor.

Jesus obviously never behaved in any of these ways. Whatever the source of the

misunderstanding, it is clearly in neither Jesus nor his teaching, which, when given a fair hearing in its original social context, is arguably one of the most revolutionary political statements ever uttered:

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 evil-doer. 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 (Matt. 5:38-41 NRSV).

When the court translators working in the hire of King James chose to translate *antistēnai* as "Resist not evil," they were doing something more than rendering Greek into English. They were translating nonviolent resistance into docility. Jesus did *not* tell his oppressed hearers not to resist evil. That would have been absurd. His entire ministry is utterly at odds with such a preposterous idea. The Greek word

is made up of two parts: *anti*, a word still used in English for "against," and *histēmi*, a verb that in its noun form (*stasis*) means violent rebellion, armed revolt, sharp dissension. In the Greek Old Testament, *antistēnai* is used primarily for military encounters—44 out of 71 times. It refers specifically to the moment two armies collide, steel on steel, until one side breaks and flees. In the New Testament it describes Barabbas, a rebel "who had committed murder in the *insurrection*" (Mark 15:7; Luke 23:19, 25), and the townspeople in Ephesus, who "are in danger of being charged with *rioting*" (Acts 19:40). The term generally refers to a potentially lethal disturbance or armed revolution.⁷

A proper translation of Jesus' teaching would then be, "Don't strike back at evil (or, one who has done you evil) in kind." "Do not retaliate against violence with violence." The Scholars Version is brilliant: "Don't react violently against the one who is evil." Jesus was no less committed to opposing evil than the anti-Roman resistance fighters. The only

difference was over the means to be used: *how* one should fight evil.

There are three general responses to evil: (1) passivity, (2) violent opposition, and 3) the third way of militant non-violence articulated by Jesus. Human evolution has conditioned us for only the first two of these responses: flight or fight. "Fight" had been the cry of Galileans who had abortively rebelled against Rome only two decades before Jesus spoke. Jesus and many of his hearers would have seen some of the two thousand of their countrymen crucified by the Romans along the roadsides. They would have known some of the inhabitants of Sepphoris (a mere three miles north of Nazareth) who had been sold into slavery for aiding the insurrectionists' assault on the arsenal there. Some also would live to experience the horrors of the war against Rome in 66–70 C.E., one of the ghastliest in human history.

If the option "fight" had no appeal to them, their only alternative was "flight": passivity, submission, or, at best, a

passive-aggressive recalcitrance in obeying commands. For them no third way existed. Submission or revolt spelled out the entire vocabulary of their alternatives to oppression.

Now we are in a better position to see why King James' faithful scholars translated *antistēnai* as "resist not." The king would not want people concluding that they had any recourse against his or any other sovereign's unjust policies. Therefore the populace must be made to believe that there are *two* alternatives and only two: flight or fight. Either we resist not or we resist. And Jesus commands us, according to these king's men, to resist not. Jesus appears to authorize monarchical absolutism. Submission is the will of God. And most modern translations have meekly followed in that path.

Neither of these alternatives has anything to do with what Jesus is proposing. It is important that we be utterly clear about this point before going on: *Jesus abhors both passivity and violence as responses to evil.* His is a third alternative

not even touched by these options. *Antistēnai* cannot be construed to mean submission.

Jesus clarifies his meaning by three brief examples. "If any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." Why the *right* cheek? How does one strike another on the right cheek anyway? Try it. A blow by the right fist in that right-handed world would land on the *left* cheek of the opponent. To strike the right cheek with the fist would require using the left hand, but in that society the left hand was used only for unclean tasks. Even to gesture with the left hand at Qumran carried the penalty of exclusion and ten days' penance (The Dead Sea Scrolls, 1QS 7). The only way one could strike the right cheek with the right hand would be with the *back of the right hand*. What we are dealing with here is unmistakably an insult, not a fistfight. The intention is not to injure but to humiliate, to put someone in his or her "place." One normally did not strike a peer thus, and if one did, the fine was exorbitant (4 zuz was the fine for a

blow to a peer with a fist, 400 zuz for backhanding him; but to an underling, no penalty whatsoever—*Mishnah, Baba Qamma* 8:1-6). A backhand slap was the normal way of admonishing inferiors. Masters backhanded slaves; husbands, wives; parents, children; men, women; Romans, Jews. *We have here a set of unequal relations, in each of which retaliation would be suicidal.* The only normal response would be cowering submission.

It is important to ask who Jesus' audience is. In every case, Jesus' listeners are not those who strike, initiate lawsuits, or impose forced labor, but their victims ("If anyone strikes *you* . . . would sue *you* . . . forces *you* to go one mile . . ."). There are among his hearers people who were subjected to these very indignities, forced to stifle their inner outrage at the dehumanizing treatment meted out to them by the hierarchical system of caste and class, race and gender, age and status, and as a result of imperial occupation.

Why then does he counsel these already humiliated people to turn the other cheek? Because this action robs the oppressor of

the power to humiliate. The person who turns the other cheek is saying, in effect, "Try again. Your first blow failed to achieve its intended effect. I deny you the power to humiliate me. I am a human being just like you. Your status does not alter that fact. You cannot demean me."

Such a response would create enormous difficulties for the striker. Purely logistically, what can he do? He cannot use the backhand because his nose is in the way. He can't use his left hand regardless. If he hits with a fist, he makes himself an equal, acknowledging the other as a peer. But the whole point of the back of the hand is to reinforce the caste system and its institutionalized inequality. Even if he orders the person flogged, the point has been irrevocably made. The oppressor has been forced, against his will, to regard this subordinate as an equal human being. The powerful person has been stripped of his power to dehumanize the other. This response, far from admonishing passivity and cowardice, is an act of defiance.

The second example Jesus gives is set in a court of law. Someone is being sued for his outer garment.⁸ Who would do that and under what circumstances? The Old Testament provides the clues.

When you make your neighbor a loan of any sort, you shall not go into his house to fetch his pledge. You shall stand outside, and the man to whom you make the loan shall bring the pledge out to you. *And if he is a poor man*, you shall not sleep in his pledge; when the sun goes down, you shall restore to him the pledge that he may sleep in his cloak and bless you. . . . You shall not . . . take a widow's garment in pledge. (Deut. 24:10-13, 17)

Only the poorest of the poor would have nothing but an outer garment to give as collateral for a loan. Jewish law strictly required its return every evening at sunset, for that was all the poor had in which to sleep. The situation to which Jesus alludes is one with which all his hearers

would have been all too familiar: the poor debtor has sunk ever deeper into poverty, the debt cannot be repaid, and his creditor has hauled him into court to try to seize his property by legal means.

Indebtedness was the most serious social problem in first-century Palestine. Jesus' parables are full of debtors struggling to salvage their lives. The situation was not, however, a natural calamity that had overtaken the incompetent. It was the direct consequence of Roman imperial policy. Emperors taxed the wealthy ruthlessly to fund their wars. Naturally, the rich sought non-liquid investments to secure their wealth. Land was best, but there was a problem: it was not bought and sold on the open market as today but was ancestrally owned and passed down over generations. Little land was ever for sale, in Palestine at least. Exorbitant interest, however, could be used to drive landowners into ever deeper debt until they were forced to sell their land. By the time of Jesus we see this process already far advanced: large estates (*latifundia*) owned by absentee landlords, managed by stew-

ards, and worked by servants, sharecroppers, and day laborers. It is no accident that the first act of the Jewish revolutionaries in 66 C.E. was to burn the Temple treasury, where the record of debts was kept.

It is in this context that Jesus speaks. His hearers are the poor ("if any one would sue *you*"). They share a rankling hatred for a system that subjects them to humiliation by stripping them of their lands, their goods, and finally even their outer garments.

Why then does Jesus counsel them to give over their inner garment as well? This would mean stripping off all their clothing and marching out of court stark naked! Put yourself in the debtor's place, and imagine the chuckles this saying must have evoked. There stands the creditor, beet-red with embarrassment, your outer garment in one hand, your underwear in the other. You have suddenly turned the tables on him. You had no hope of winning the trial; the law was entirely in his favor. But you have refused to be humiliated, and at the same time

you have registered a stunning protest against a system that spawns such debt. You have said in effect, "You want my robe? Here, take everything! Now you've got all I have except my body. Is that what you'll take next?"

Nakedness was taboo in Judaism, and shame fell not on the naked party, but on the person viewing or causing one's nakedness (Gen. 9:20-27). By stripping you have brought the creditor under the same prohibition that led to the curse of Canaan. As you parade into the street, your friends and neighbors, startled, aghast, inquire what happened. You explain. They join your growing procession, which now resembles a victory parade. The entire system by which debtors are oppressed has been publicly unmasked. The creditor is revealed to be not a "respectable" moneylender but a party in the reduction of an entire social class to landlessness and destitution. This unmasking is not simply punitive, however; it offers the creditor a chance to see, perhaps for the first time in his life, what his practices cause, and to repent. Far from collaborating in

injustice, the poor man has used the law, aikido-like, to make an exploitative law a laughing stock.

Jesus in effect is sponsoring clowning. In so doing he carries on a venerable tradition in Judaism. As a later saying of the Talmud runs, "If your neighbor calls you an ass, put a saddle on your back."⁹

The Powers That Be literally stand on their dignity. Nothing depotentiates them faster than deft lampooning. By refusing to be awed by their power, the powerless are emboldened to seize the initiative, even where structural change is not possible. This message, far from being a counsel of perfection unattainable in this life, is a practical, strategic measure for empowering the oppressed. It provides a hint of how to take on the entire system in a way that unmasks its essential cruelty and to burlesque its pretensions to justice, law, and order. Here is a poor man who will no longer be treated as a sponge to be squeezed dry by the rich. He accepts the laws as they stand, pushes them to the point of absurdity, and reveals them for what they really are. He strips nude, walks

out before his compatriots, and leaves the creditor and the whole economic edifice he represents, stark naked.

Under the apartheid regime in South Africa, the authorities had for a long time sought a way to destroy a particular shantytown, without success. Then one day, after most of the men and women had left for work, the army arrived. The soldiers announced that the few women there had five minutes to gather their things and then the bulldozers would commence to work. The women, perhaps sensing the prudery of the farm boys who largely made up the army, stood in front of the bulldozers and stripped off all their clothes. The army fled.

Was Johan Stander, the renegade South African nationalist businessman, thinking of this passage, or was he just fed up, when he removed his trousers in front of the Port Elizabeth city hall in April 1986, while demonstrating against apartheid?¹⁰

Jesus' third example, the one about going the second mile, is drawn from the very enlightened practice of limiting the

amount of forced labor that Roman soldiers could levy on subject peoples. Jews would have seldom encountered legionnaires except in time of war or insurrection. It would have been auxiliaries who were headquartered in Judea, paid at half the rate of legionnaires and rather a scruffy bunch. In Galilee, Herod Antipas maintained an army patterned after Rome's; presumably it also had the right to impose labor. Mile markers were placed regularly beside the highways. A soldier could impress a civilian to carry his pack one mile only; to force the civilian to go farther carried with it severe penalties under military law. In this way Rome attempted to limit the anger of the occupied people and still keep its armies on the move. Nevertheless, this levy was a bitter reminder to the Jews that they were a subject people even in the Promised Land.

To this proud but subjugated people Jesus does not counsel revolt. One does not "befriend" the soldier, draw him aside, and drive a knife into his ribs. Jesus was keenly aware of the futility of

armed revolt against Roman imperial might and minced no words about it, though it must have cost him support from the revolutionary factions.

But why walk the second mile? Is this not to rebound to the opposite extreme: aiding and abetting the enemy? Not at all. The question here, as in the two previous instances, is how the oppressed can recover the initiative, how they can assert their human dignity in a situation that cannot for the time being be changed. The rules are Caesar's, but not how one responds to the rules—that is God's, and Caesar has no power over that.

Imagine then the soldier's surprise when, at the next mile marker, he reluctantly reaches to assume his pack (sixty-five to eighty-five pounds in full gear), and you say, "Oh no, let me carry it another mile." Why would you do that? What are you up to? Normally he has to coerce your kinsmen to carry his pack, and now you do it cheerfully and *will not stop!* Is this a provocation? Are you insulting his strength? Being kind? Trying to get him disciplined for seeming to

make you go farther than you should? Are you planning to file a complaint? Create trouble?

From a situation of servile impressments, you have once more seized the initiative. You have taken back the power of choice. The soldier is thrown off-balance by being deprived of the predictability of your response. He has never dealt with such a problem before. Now you have forced him into making a decision for which nothing in his previous experience has prepared him. If he has enjoyed feeling superior to the vanquished, he will not enjoy it today. Imagine the hilarious situation of a Roman infantryman pleading with a Jew, "Aw, come on, please give me back my pack!" The humor of this scene may escape those who picture it through sanctimonious eyes, but it could scarcely have been lost on Jesus' hearers, who must have been regaled at the prospect of thus discomfiting their oppressors.

Some readers may object to the idea of discomfiting the soldier or embarrassing the creditor. But can people who are engaged in oppressive acts repent unless

they are made uncomfortable with their actions? There is, admittedly, the danger of using nonviolence as a tactic of revenge and humiliation. There is also, at the opposite extreme, an equal danger of sentimentality and softness that confuses the uncompromising love of Jesus with being nice. Loving confrontation can free both the oppressed from docility and the oppressor from sin.

Even if nonviolent action does not immediately change the heart of the oppressor, it does affect those committed to it. As Martin Luther King Jr. attested, it gives them new self-respect and calls up resources of strength and courage they did not know they had. To those who have power, Jesus' advice to the powerless may seem paltry. But to those whose lifelong pattern has been to cringe, bow, and scrape before their masters, and who have internalized their role as inferiors, this small step is momentous. It is comparable to the attempt by black charwomen in South Africa to join together in what would be for some of them an almost insuperable step: to begin calling their employers by their first names.

These three examples amplify what Jesus means in his thesis statement: "Don't react violently against the one who is evil." Instead of the two options ingrained in us by millions of years of unreflective, brute response to biological threats from the environment—flight or fight—Jesus offers a third way. This new way marks a historic mutation in human development: the revolt against the principle of natural selection.¹¹ With Jesus a way emerges by which evil can be opposed without being mirrored:

Jesus' Third Way

- Seize the moral initiative
- Find a creative alternative to violence
- Assert your own humanity and dignity as a person
- Meet force with ridicule or humor
- Break the cycle of humiliation
- Refuse to submit or to accept the inferior position
- Expose the injustice of the system
- Take control of the power dynamic
- Shame the oppressor into repentance

- Stand your ground
- Force the Powers to make decisions for which they are not prepared
- Recognize your own power
- Be willing to suffer rather than to retaliate
- Cause the oppressor to see you in a new light
- Deprive the oppressor of a situation where a show of force is effective
- Be willing to undergo the penalty for breaking unjust laws
- Die to fear of the old order and its rules

Flight

Submission
Passivity
Withdrawal
Surrender

Fight

Armed revolt
Violent rebellion
Direct retaliation
Revenge

It is too bad that Jesus did not provide fifteen or twenty further examples, since we do not tend toward this new response naturally. Some examples from political history might help engrave it more deeply in our minds.

In Alagamar, Brazil, a group of peasants organized a long-term struggle to preserve their lands against attempts at illegal expropriation by national and international firms (with the connivance of local politicians and the military). Some of the peasants were arrested and jailed in town. Their companions decided they were all equally responsible, so hundreds marched to town and filled the house of the judge, demanding to be jailed with those who had been arrested. The judge was finally obliged to send them all home, including the prisoners.¹²

Another, one that Jesus himself must have known and that may have served as a model for his examples: In 26 C.E., when Pontius Pilate brought the imperial standards into Jerusalem and displayed them at the Fortress Antonio overlooking the Temple, all Jerusalem was thrown into a tumult. These "effigies of Caesar that are called standards" not only infringed on the commandment against images but were the particular gods of the legions. Jewish leaders requested their removal. When Pilate refused, a large crowd of Jews "fell prostrate around his house and

for five whole days and nights remained motionless in that position." On the sixth day, Pilate assembled the multitude in the stadium with the apparent intention of answering them. Instead, his soldiers surrounded the Jews in a ring three deep. As Josephus tells it,

Pilate, after threatening to cut them down, if they refused to admit Caesar's images, signaled to the soldiers to draw their swords. Thereupon the Jews, as by concerted action, flung themselves in a body on the ground, extended their necks, and exclaimed that they were ready rather to die than to transgress the law. Overcome with astonishment at such intense religious zeal, Pilate gave orders for the immediate removal of the standards from Jerusalem.¹³

About 150 village women shut down most of a multinational oil company's operations in Nigeria for nearly a week. They commandeered a ChevronTexaco staff ferry to sneak into the company's

Escravos pipeline terminal. The unarmed women continued to occupy the terminal, stopping exports and trapping about 700 workers inside. The women wanted jobs for their sons and electricity in their impoverished homes in this, the world's sixth-largest oil exporter nation. When planes would land, the women would surround them so they couldn't take off again. Other teams of women shut down the docks and helicopter pads. Poorest of the poor, these mothers discovered the power of numbers, and, as of this writing, still had the upper hand (July 15, 2002, *New York Times*, A1).

Here is an example that deals with the perennial problem of bullying, as told by the mother in one of our workshops. Her son was the smallest kid in his class, and he was afflicted with chronic sinusitis. On his school bus there was a bully who was terrorizing all the kids. Finally, one day the boy had had it with the bully. He blew his nose into his right hand, then walked toward the bully, extending his hand, and saying, "I've always wanted to shake the hand of a real bully." The bully began to

back up to the back of the bus, where he meekly sat down and never bothered anyone on that bus again, because that nose was always at the ready. What I like about this story is the way the boy used his weakness as a strength. Just as Jesus taught, he took the momentum of evil and used it to throw his opponent.

The nurses in a hospital in Saskatchewan were tired of being browbeaten, corrected in front of patients, and generally made to feel inferior by the doctors on staff. The nurses put their heads together and came up with a plan. They went to a sympathetic administration and set up a "pink alert," which would be transmitted over the intercom the next time a doctor started abusing a nurse. From all over the hospital, nurses who were free converged on the scene, surrounded the doctor, holding hands, and waited for him to make the first move. He located the smallest nurse and plunged toward her. But the circle merely gave with his charge. He tried another nurse; same result. It became like the childhood game Red Rover. The circle was like an

amoeba that simply gave with his every move. Finally he dropped his hands, acquiescing in their lesson. That pretty much took care of that problem from then on out, for their circle, like the boy's nose, was ready at a moment's notice.

It is important to repeat such stories in order to extend our imaginations for creative nonviolence. Since it is not a natural response, we need to be schooled in it. We need models, and we need to rehearse it in our daily lives if we ever hope to resort to it in crises.

Sadly, Jesus' three examples have been turned into laws, with no reference to the utterly changed contexts in which they were being applied. His attempt to nerve the powerless to assert their humanity under inhuman conditions has been turned into a legalistic prohibition on schoolyard fistfights between peers. Pacifists and those who reject pacifism alike have tended to regard Jesus' infinitely malleable insights as iron rules, the one group urging that they be observed inflexibly, the other treating them as impossible demands intended to break us

and catapult us into the arms of grace. The creative, ironic, playful quality of Jesus' teaching has thus been buried under an avalanche of humorless commentary. And as always, law kills.

How many a battered wife has been counseled, on the strength of a legalistic reading of this passage, to "turn the other cheek," when what she needs, according to the spirit of Jesus' words, is to find a way to restore her own dignity and end the vicious circle of humiliation, guilt, and bruising. She needs to assert some sort of control in the situation and force her husband to regard her as an equal, or get out of the relationship altogether. The victim needs to recover her self-worth and seize the initiative from her oppressor. And he needs to be helped to overcome his violence. The most creative and loving thing she could do, at least in the American setting, might be to have him arrested. "Turn the other cheek" is not intended as a legal requirement to be applied woodenly in every situation, but as the impetus for discovering creative alternatives that transcend the only two

that we are conditioned to perceive: submission or violence, flight or fight.

Shortly after I was promoted from the "B" team to the varsity basketball squad in high school, I noticed that Ernie, the captain, was missing shot after shot from the corner because he was firing it like a bullet. So, helpfully I thought, I shouted, "Arch it, Ernie, arch it." His best friend, Ham, thought advice from a greenhorn impertinent, and from that day on verbally sniped at me without letup. I had been raised a Christian, so I "turned the other cheek." To each sarcastic jibe I answered with a smile or soft words. This confused Ham somewhat; by the end of the season he lost his taste for taunts.

It was not until four years later that I suddenly woke to the realization that I had not loved Ham into changing. The fact was, *I hated his guts*. It might have been far more creative for me to have challenged him to a fistfight. Then he would have had to deal with me as an equal. But I was *afraid* to fight him, though the fight would probably have been a draw. I was scared I might get hurt.

I was hiding behind the Christian "injunction" to "turn the other cheek," rather than asking, "What is the most creative, transformative response to this situation?" [Perhaps I had done the right thing for the wrong reason, but I suspect that creative nonviolence can never be a genuinely moral response unless we are capable of first entertaining the possibility of violence and consciously saying "No." Otherwise our nonviolence may actually be a mask for cowardice,] as it most certainly was for me.

The oppressed of the third world are justifiably suspicious that we of the first world are more concerned with avoiding violence than with realizing justice. Nobel Peace Prize laureate Adolfo Pérez Esquivel comments, "What has always caught my attention is the attitude of the peace movement in Europe and the United States, where nonviolence is envisioned as the final objective. Nonviolence is not the final objective. Nonviolence is a lifestyle. The final objective is humanity. It is life."¹⁴

very
good!

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For Discussion

1. What strikes you as new in this discussion of Jesus' teaching on nonviolence?
2. Were you taught to be cowardly by the "doormat for Jesus" interpretation of this text?
3. If you have children, how might you help them deal creatively with bullying?
4. Do role-plays of Jesus' three examples of nonviolence. You might plant someone in the group who has on a swimsuit or jogging shorts who can play the role of the debtor.