

I think that at the deepest level, being a Christian for me means being a follower of Christ, someone who walks the path that Jesus blazed. But to walk that path, one must know the way, and knowing the way means being able to understand Jesus’ directions. But it is easy to mis-hear those directions, and so get lost.

Today’s scripture is from Matthew’s collection of Jesus’ sayings that for centuries has been known as “the Sermon on the Mount.” This collection is Matthew’s attempt to capture the very essence of Jesus’ teaching. And most Biblical scholars agree that today’s reading almost certainly represents the very words of Jesus himself, with only minor editing by Matthew and the early church tradition that carried those words to Matthew. These are therefore directions that we as Christians absolutely need to hear and understand.

But because people forgot the cultural context of these words within a few centuries of Jesus’ life, Christians for centuries have mis-heard Jesus’ guidance. Good Christian slaves have passively taken their masters’ beatings, good Christian spouses have passively submitted to abuse, and good Christian leaders have participated in oppressing the poor with these words ringing in their ears. Others, taking these words as prime evidence, have rejected Jesus’ teaching altogether as hopelessly idealistic. Even those of us who call ourselves Christian have a hard time actually following the surface meaning of these directions.

However, the work of scholars during the past half-century has enormously increased our understanding of the cultural context of Jesus’ sayings. And for this scripture in particular, understanding that context means that its sayings take on a *completely different meaning* than a surface reading would suggest. Let’s see how this works.

To understand this passage, we need to know two general things about Palestine during Jesus’ time. First, we need to understand the economic status of Jesus’ followers. Jesus was speaking to poor peasants, who made up about 93% of the population. These people were mostly tenant farmers, working land owned by the wealthy elite. Taxes and rents ate up most of what a peasant could earn in the best of times, and if a crop failed, they were often stripped of what little they had and thrown into debtor’s prison until their family could pay the debt. Secondly, Palestine was under Roman occupation. These hated outsiders and their Judean collaborators enforced the ruinous economic system by brutally suppressing any opposition.

Under the circumstances, perhaps you can understand that a deep anger lay just beneath the surface in Jesus’ hearers. But Jesus begins by saying, as the King James translation puts it, “Do not resist evil.” In this translation, it *sounds* like Jesus calls us to passively accept evil. But the Greek verb in this sentence is more specific than the English word “resist.” It really means “to violently oppose” and is used most often elsewhere in the context of military action. So a better translation might be “Do not take up arms against evil.” In Roman-occupied Palestine, this was good and wise advice: the Romans were very effective at putting down armed resistance. But Jesus goes on to describe how one *can* effectively resist evil.

His first example involves “turning the other cheek.” One clue that a surface reading misses something important is that it begins “If anyone strikes you on the *right* cheek...” If Jesus was only urging that we passively suffer beatings, then what does the *right* cheek have to do with it? To see what this really means, we need to *visualize* what is going on. My good father will help demonstrate. Imagine him as an old Jewish peasant, and that I am going to strike him on the right cheek. (Dad, point to your right cheek). Now, the only way to strike him on the right cheek with my right hand is with a backhanded slap, like this. In Jesus’ culture, this kind of slap was the way

a superior would strike an inferior. It was meant to humiliate, emphasizing the inferiority of the person struck. Retaliation was impossible: would only invite worse.

What is Jesus' advice under the circumstances? "Turn the other cheek." (Dad, show me your left cheek.) At one level, this invites the striker to strike again. But how can I strike his *left* cheek with my right hand? I can only strike *that* cheek with my open hand or fist, like this. But that is how *equals* would hit each other. Dad's turning the other cheek therefore presents me with an unexpected problem: I can only continue the beating if I implicitly acknowledge him as an equal. The simple act of turning the other cheek breaks the accepted cycle of humiliation, forcing the striker to actually *look at* the one turning the cheek.

Two stories from the time of South African apartheid illustrate the method. A black woman was walking on a street with her children when a passing white man spat in her face. She stopped and said "Thank you, and now, please, the children?" Caught off balance, the white man was completely unable to respond. In another case, archbishop Desmond Tutu, walking on a very narrow sidewalk, came face to face with a white man who growled, "I don't give way to gorillas." Tutu promptly stepped into the gutter, and with a deep sweeping gesture, said "Ah, yes, but I do."

Jesus' second example involves a court case and garments. Now, a person in Jesus' time wore exactly two layers of clothing. A creditor suing a debtor in Jesus' time could legally require that the peasant give up his *outer* garment as collateral. The prophet Amos bitterly decries the practice in Amos 2:7-8: "They who trample the head of the poor into the dust...lay themselves down before the altar on garments taken in pledge." What is Jesus' suggestion in such a situation? "Give up your inner garment as well." We might therefore better translate this saying this way: "If anyone sues you for the shirt off your back, give him your undies too." The point would be taken by viewers even in a modern courtroom, but was even more pointed in Jesus' culture, where *seeing* nakedness was much more shameful than *being* naked.

Jesus' third example involves "going the second mile." An important clue about the meaning of this saying is that this is the only time the Greek word *milion*, meaning the Roman mile, appears in the Greek New Testament: elsewhere, distances are expressed in the standard Greek unit of *stadia*. Moreover, the word translated "force to go" is actually a technical term for when a soldier compels someone to carry a load. We know from Roman texts that Roman soldiers were only allowed to force a subject to carry their gear one Roman mile, a comparatively enlightened policy for the time, though it was still bitterly resented. Now I want you to imagine the scene where a peasant follows Jesus' advice. Again my Dad, playing the role of the shrewd peasant, will demonstrate.

SOLDIER: OK, boy, your mile is up. Give me the pack and you can go.

PEASANT: Hey, no problem, boss, I can carry it another mile.

SOLDIER: No you can't! It's not allowed!

PEASANT: It's not allowed to give a poor soldier a hand? I'm happy to help! (Walks on.)

SOLDIER: No, no, don't you help me! My centurion will have my head! Stop, I say!

And can you imagine the soldier trying to explain to the centurion why the peasant carried the load more than one mile, and his face getting redder and redder as his fellows laugh and laugh and the centurion chews him out for such an obviously lame excuse?

What is the point of all three of these little bits of advice? Jesus is telling us neither to passively accept evil, nor to take arms against it, but rather to resist it *creatively*. Jesus calls for genuine resistance, but it is resistance with a human face. In all three cases, the victim seems willing to accept additional abuse, but in such a way that *exposes* the abuse for what it truly is: abuse of another human being. Moreover, this mode of resistance makes effective retribution im-

possible: how can one justify punishing someone who is offering extra compliance, in spite of the point they are making?

Most importantly, these three scenes of nonviolent resistance work precisely because they assume that the oppressor is actually a human being who can be shocked into seeing the victim's humanity. Jesus hammers the point home, saying "I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Here, we get hung up on the word "love," because in English, "love" means a warm positive feeling, and I personally do not have many warm positive feelings toward my enemies. But the Greeks had four different words for "love," and the one translated here essentially means "to treat humanely." So we might translate "I say to you, treat your enemies as human." Hmm, maybe I *can* do that. Jesus in fact goes on to invite us to view our enemies as God does, that is, as God's beloved children: "so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, who makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends [life-giving] rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. Be true to God's way, as your heavenly Father is true."

Even though the gap between the rich and poor in our society is not as great or grindingly oppressive as it was in Jesus' time (at least yet), these problems still seem pretty familiar, don't they? All through our history and especially recently, it seems, our unthinking reaction is to demonize our enemies, both foreign and domestic, in spite of overwhelming evidence of just how futile and self-defeating this is, because it locks us into endless and hopeless cycles of retaliation. What is the *matter* with us? We *know* that breakthroughs for peace always require finding common ground, and finding ways for everyone to save face: in short, finding each others' humanity. And yet somehow we just can't seem to *get* it. Jesus' challenge to treat our enemies as human is therefore as relevant and necessary and difficult as it has always been.

So I hope that you can see that Jesus' way is therefore neither passive acceptance of abuse or idealistic nonsense but a clear-eyed, creative, and effective response to evil in the world, indeed the only way consistent with God's love for all. It took me decades of study to understand Jesus' directions here, but now that I do, I think this is a path I *can* walk as follower of Christ, and walk proudly, even passionately, though I know I would have to pray constantly for guidance to show even a tiny part of Jesus' brilliance. Who knows where we might go if we were to *really* walk the path of seeing our enemies as human beings?

Will you walk with me? Let the people say, AMEN.

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Note: I learned much about this passage first from New Testament scholar Walter Wink, whose book *Engaging the Powers* (Fortress, 1992) is excellent reading.