The Constitution of the Kingdom

A 33-Session Journey through the Sermon on the Mount & the Sermon on the Plain

SESSION SIXTEEN — Turn the Other Cheek: The Third Way

Part Three: The Greater Righteousness · Texts: Matthew 5:38–42; Luke 6:29–30

The Texts

> **Matthew 5:38–41** *You have heard… '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 forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.*
>
> **Luke 6:29–30** *If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you…*

The Most Misunderstood Words He Ever Spoke

Of everything Jesus ever said, this may be the most famous — and the most misunderstood. "Turn the other cheek." We use it as a synonym for spinelessness. It is what we say to counsel surrender: just turn the other cheek, let it go, don't make waves, take the abuse. It has come to mean: be a doormat.

And that reading has done terrible damage. It has been spoken to battered wives to send them back to their abusers. It has been used to tell the oppressed to accept their chains, the beaten to stay down, the wronged to swallow it quietly. If that is what Jesus meant, then this teaching has been a curse to the very people the rest of the Sermon fights for.

But it is not what he meant. Not even close. What Jesus actually taught in these verses is one of the most daring, creative, and defiant strategies for confronting evil the world has ever seen — and it is neither violence nor surrender. It is a third thing entirely. Turn the other cheek, it turns out, is not how you give in. It is how you fight — without becoming what you are fighting.

Let's search the Scriptures together.

First: the "Old" Command Was Already Mercy

Start with what Jesus quotes: "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." We hear that and picture something bloodthirsty and barbaric — the crude justice of a cruder age. But that is exactly backwards. "An eye for an eye" was one of the great mercies of the ancient Law. In a world of blood feuds, where one insult could spiral into a massacre and a single death could ignite a war between clans, this law drew a line: no more than was taken. Only an eye for an eye — not a life for an eye, not your whole family for my wounded pride. It capped vengeance at proportion. It was humanity's first great restraint on the runaway logic of revenge.[1]

[1]Unless noted, Scripture is quoted from the New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition (NRSVue), the base translation for this course; parallels at Luke 6:29–30. "An eye for an eye" is the lex talionis (Exodus 21:23–25; Leviticus 24:19–20; Deuteronomy 19:21) — in its origin a limit on vengeance, capping retaliation at strict proportion,

So do not sneer at the old command. It was already bending the world toward restraint, already saying "this far and no further" to the appetite for payback. Jesus simply takes that trajectory — the long divine project of reining in vengeance — and drives it all the way to its end.

What "Do Not Resist" Really Means

And here is where we have to slow down, because a single phrase has been mistranslated in our ears for centuries. Jesus says, "do not resist an evildoer," and we have heard: be passive, don't push back, let evil have its way. But the Greek word underneath "resist" is sharper and more specific than that. It is a word for violent resistance — meeting force with force, the armed pushback of a soldier or a rebel. Jesus is not telling you to let evil roll over you and do nothing; his entire life was one long, fierce resistance to evil. He is rejecting one particular method: answering violence with violence, retaliation in kind, becoming the mirror of the thing you hate. But — and this is the genius of it — he is not offering passive surrender as the alternative either. He is about to show us a third thing, standing right in the narrow space between the raised fist and the bowed head.[2]

The Third Way: Three Acts of Defiant Dignity

Watch closely, because each of the three little scenes Jesus paints, understood in his own world, is not surrender at all. Each one is a brilliant, subversive act that refuses violence and refuses submission at the same time — and instead drags the injustice into the light and hands the victim back their dignity.

The Cheek

Look at exactly what Jesus says: if someone strikes you on the right cheek. Picture that. To hit a person's right cheek with your right hand — and in that world you used only the right hand — you cannot throw a punch; the geometry does not allow it. You have to backhand them. And a backhand was not how you fought an equal. It was how a master struck a slave, a Roman struck a Jew, a husband struck a wife — a blow designed not to injure but to humiliate, to put an inferior back in their place. So when Jesus says "turn the other cheek," hear what he is actually telling the humiliated person to do: turn your left cheek toward him. Now the backhand is impossible. To strike you again he would have to come at you with his fist or his open palm — which is how you hit an equal, a peer, someone who can hit back. In one silent, defiant motion, the "inferior" has said: I am not beneath you. I am a human being. You may strike me, but you will have to treat me as your equal to do it. That is not the flinch of a doormat. That is a person refusing, without lifting a hand, to be humiliated.[3]

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not a license for it.

[2] "Do not resist an evildoer": the Greek antistēnai (from anthistēmi) commonly denotes violent resistance or armed opposition. Jesus rejects retaliation in kind, not the resisting of evil as such — his life was continuous resistance to evil. The reading that follows is Walter Wink's; see Engaging the Powers and The Powers That Be.

[3] "The right cheek" implies a backhand blow (the right hand striking the right cheek), the gesture by which a superior humiliated an inferior. Turning the left cheek denies the backhand and forces the aggressor to strike as one strikes an equal — a nonviolent assertion of dignity, not a submission (Wink).

The Cloak

The second scene is a courtroom. Picture a poor man being sued for a debt, and the only collateral he has left in all the world is the clothing on his body — his outer coat. This was so common that the Law itself commanded a creditor to return a poor man's cloak by nightfall, because it was the only blanket he had. Jesus says: when they take your coat, give them your undergarment too. Do you understand what that means? It means strip. Stand there naked in the courtroom, in front of everyone. And here is the cultural key: in that world, nakedness shamed not the naked person but the one who caused the nakedness — the one looking on. So by stripping bare, the debtor turns the whole proceeding into a piece of devastating street theater. He exposes, for all to see, the obscenity of a system that would take the last clothing from a poor man's back. He shames the creditor and the greed of the entire arrangement — and he does it without raising a hand. Prophetic protest, not surrender.[4]

The Mile

And the third scene: a Roman soldier. Under Roman law, a soldier could compel any subject of the empire to carry his pack — but the law limited it to a single mile, and a soldier could be disciplined for forcing more. Everyone knew the rule; it was a daily humiliation with a legal boundary. So when Jesus says "if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second," he is handing the oppressed a startling move. At the mile marker, when the soldier reaches to take back his pack — keep walking. Suddenly the soldier is off balance. Is this man mocking me? Is he trying to get me in trouble with my centurion? The victim has seized the initiative. He is no longer a pack animal being used; he is a free human being who has taken back his own agency and left his oppressor scrambling. The tables turn, and not a single blow is struck.[5]

Neither the Sword nor the Doormat

Do you see the shape of all three now? When evil comes, the world offers two options, and only two: hit back, or lie down. Take up the sword — and become the very violence you were resisting. Or submit — and be crushed. Jesus refuses them both. He will not let you become a monster, and he will not let you be a doormat. Instead he teaches a third way: fierce, creative, defiant, and completely nonviolent — a way to resist evil without becoming it, to insist on your own dignity without destroying the humanity of the one who wrongs you.

This is the meekness of Session Four, finally in motion — strength under perfect control, the war horse bridled and aimed. And lest you think it naive or weak, remember: this is the exact strategy Gandhi turned against the British Empire, and that Dr. King turned against the machinery of Jim Crow. It faced down fire hoses and jail cells and armies — and it won. Turn-the-other-cheek is not the absence of courage. It is the most disciplined courage there is.

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[4]The debtor sued for his outer garment (himation) had, by the Law, a right to its return by nightfall (Exodus 22:26–27). Giving the undergarment (chitōn) too means standing naked — and in that culture nakedness shamed the one who caused it, exposing the injustice of the creditor and the predatory system (Wink).

[5]Roman impressment (angareia) let a soldier compel one mile of portage; the legal limit meant a second, voluntary mile put the soldier at risk and returned initiative to the oppressed (Wink). This "third way" enacts the meekness of Session Four (praus, strength under control) and formed Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. It must never be used to counsel the abused to remain in harm; it is a strategy of resistance, not submission. Safety and dignity are goods God defends.

A Necessary Word for the Wounded

And now I must say something with great care, because these words, more than almost any others, have been turned into a weapon against the very people they were meant to free. "Turn the other cheek" has been spoken to battered spouses to send them home to their abusers. It has been said to the beaten and the oppressed to make them accept their suffering in silence. Hear me clearly: that is a betrayal of everything Jesus is teaching here.

This passage is the opposite of "submit to the one harming you." It is a manual for resisting evil — not for absorbing it quietly. Sometimes the most faithful, most creative nonviolent resistance available to you is to get to safety, to expose what is being done, to refuse the shame that belongs to the one doing the harm and hand it back where it belongs. If you are being hurt, Jesus is not asking you to stand still and take it. He is on your side. Your safety and your dignity matter to God, and no one — no one — gets to use this text to keep you in harm's way.

The Cross, and the Unclenched Hand

This third way is, finally, the way of the cross itself — where Jesus absorbed the full violence of the powers, refused to hand it back, and by that refusal exposed them for what they were and broke their grip. It is the one thing that has ever actually stopped the cycle of violence in its tracks: a person willing to take the blow and not pass it on.

And notice how the passage ends — with open hands. "Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow." Because the clenched fist of retaliation and the clenched fist of greed are, in the end, the same fist. And Jesus is prying our hands open — toward the enemy who strikes us, and toward the neighbor who needs us, both at once.

Freedom for Others

Put it to our thread, and it is the whole architecture of the passage. This third way is freedom for others in its most demanding form: it refuses to answer the dehumanizing of me by dehumanizing you; it insists on everyone's dignity — the victim's and, astonishingly, the oppressor's — and it breaks the cycle of harm instead of feeding it another turn. So ask with me: where am I trapped in the world's only two options — hitting back, or lying down — and what might a creative, dignified, nonviolent third way actually look like there? Whose dignity, including my own, am I being called to assert without picking up the sword? *Freedom for others may cost us the sweet satisfaction of retaliation — what can we lay down?*

Around the Table — For Discussion

- Before today, what did "turn the other cheek" mean to you? How does it change things to hear it as resistance rather than surrender?
- Jesus offers a third way between hitting back and lying down. Where in your life are you stuck in just those two options?
- "An eye for an eye" was a limit on vengeance, not a license. Where do you feel the pull of runaway payback — wanting more than was taken from you?

- This text has been misused to keep the abused in harm. Why is it so important to be clear that Jesus is teaching resistance, not submission?
- Freedom for others may cost us something. Where might God be inviting you to a creative, nonviolent third way this week?

This Week — A Practice

Two movements. First, find your third way. Name one situation where you are caught between striking back and simply taking it — and prayerfully imagine a creative, nonviolent, dignity-asserting third response, the way Jesus did with the cheek and the cloak and the mile. Then, if you can, try it. Second, unclench one hand. Open your grip somewhere this week — refuse a retaliation you were owed, or give freely to someone who asked — and feel what it is to meet the world with an open hand instead of a fist. (And hear the care in this: if you are in danger, your creative third way may be to get safe and to expose the harm. That is resistance, not failure, and it is exactly what love looks like for you right now.) Then bring back what you found. This Kingdom, like all the rest, is learned in the doing.

Looking Ahead

Next session we reach the summit — the sixth and final contrast, and the climax of everything Jesus has been building toward: "you have heard 'love your neighbor and hate your enemy' — but I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you." It is the hardest and most beautiful command in the whole Sermon, and it completes Part Three.

Benediction

So go this week and learn the third way — the narrow, shining path between the raised fist and the bowed head. Refuse to become the evil you resist, and refuse to be crushed by it. Assert your God-given dignity, and the dignity even of the one who wrongs you, and break the cycle of harm by being the one who will not pass the blow along. And if you are in danger, hear it once more: getting safe is not surrender — it is the resistance love requires of you now. Blessed are those who resist evil without becoming it, for they walk the very road of the cross, and it is the only road that has ever led anywhere new.

Love, practiced — not just professed — reveals the Kingdom among us.

Blessings,
Pastor Mick Finch

SESSION SIXTEEN

Introduction Video Script

Single presenter, to camera · target 5–6 minutes · warm, steady, unhurried

[Begin still.]

Welcome back to the table. Of everything Jesus ever said, this may be the most famous — and the most misunderstood. "Turn the other cheek." We use it as a synonym for spinelessness — it's what we say to counsel surrender. Just turn the other cheek. Let it go. Take the abuse. It's come to mean: be a doormat.

And that reading has done terrible damage. It's been spoken to battered wives to send them back to their abusers. It's been used to tell the oppressed to accept their chains. If that's what Jesus meant, this teaching has been a curse to the very people the rest of the Sermon fights for. But it is not what he meant — not even close. What Jesus actually taught here is one of the most daring, creative, defiant strategies for confronting evil the world has ever seen. And it's neither violence nor surrender. It's a third thing entirely. Turn the other cheek isn't how you give in — it's how you fight, without becoming what you're fighting.

[The old command.]

Start with what he quotes — "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." We hear that as bloodthirsty and barbaric. It's exactly backwards. "An eye for an eye" was one of the great mercies of the ancient Law. In a world of blood feuds, where one insult could spiral into a massacre, this law drew a line: no more than was taken. Only an eye for an eye — not a life, not your whole family for my wounded pride. It capped vengeance at proportion. It was humanity's first great restraint on revenge. So don't sneer at the old command — it was already bending the world toward restraint. Jesus just takes that and drives it all the way home.

[Do not resist.]

And here's where we slow down, because one phrase has been mistranslated in our ears for centuries. Jesus says "do not resist an evildoer," and we've heard: be passive, let evil have its way. But the Greek word under "resist" is sharper than that — it's a word for violent resistance, meeting force with force, the armed pushback of a rebel. Jesus isn't telling you to let evil roll over you — his whole life was resistance to evil. He's rejecting one method: answering violence with violence, becoming the mirror of the thing you hate. And he's not offering passive surrender instead. He's about to show a third thing, right in the narrow space between the raised fist and the bowed head.

[The three scenes.]

Watch closely, because each of the three little scenes he paints, in his own world, is not surrender — it's a brilliant, subversive act that refuses violence and refuses submission at the same time.

The cheek. He says the right cheek. To hit someone's right cheek with your right hand — and they used only the right hand — you can't punch; you have to backhand them. And a backhand wasn't how you fought an equal. It was how a master hit a slave, a superior humiliated an inferior. So "turn the other cheek" means: turn your left cheek toward him. Now he can't

backhand you. To hit you again he'd have to use his fist — which is how you hit an equal. In one silent move, the "inferior" says: I am not beneath you. I'm a human being. That's not a doormat — that's someone refusing to be humiliated, without lifting a hand.

The cloak. A poor man's sued for a debt, and all he's got left is the clothes on his back — his coat. The Law even said you had to give a poor man's cloak back by nightfall. Jesus says: when they take your coat, give them your undergarment too. Meaning — strip. Stand there naked in the courtroom. And in that culture, nakedness shamed the one who caused it, not the naked person. So the debtor turns the whole thing into street theater that exposes the obscenity of stripping a poor man bare. He shames the creditor — without raising a hand.

The mile. A Roman soldier could force any subject to carry his pack — but the law capped it at one mile, and he could be punished for demanding more. So "go the second mile" hands the oppressed a startling move: at the marker, keep walking. Now the soldier's off balance — is this guy trying to get me in trouble? The victim's seized the initiative. He's not a pack animal anymore; he's a free man who's taken back his agency and left his oppressor scrambling. Tables turned — no blow struck.

[Neither sword nor doormat.]

See the shape of all three? When evil comes, the world offers two options: hit back, or lie down. Take up the sword and become the violence you're resisting — or submit and be crushed. Jesus refuses them both. He won't let you become a monster, and he won't let you be a doormat. He teaches a third way — fierce, creative, defiant, completely nonviolent. This is the meekness of session four in motion — strength under control. And it's exactly what Gandhi turned against an empire and King turned against Jim Crow. It faced down fire hoses and armies — and it won. Turning the cheek isn't the absence of courage. It's the most disciplined courage there is.

[The wounded — careful and firm.]

And I have to say something with great care, because these words have been turned into a weapon against the very people they were meant to free. "Turn the other cheek" has been used to send battered spouses home to their abusers, to tell the beaten to accept it in silence. Hear me clearly: that is a betrayal of everything Jesus is teaching. This passage is the opposite of "submit to the one harming you." It's a manual for resisting evil, not absorbing it. Sometimes the most faithful nonviolent resistance is to get to safety, to expose what's being done, to hand the shame back to the one it belongs to. If you're being hurt, Jesus is not asking you to stand still and take it. He's on your side. Your safety and your dignity matter to God — and no one gets to use this text to keep you in harm's way.

[The thread and practice.]

So here's our question this week — freedom for others: where am I trapped in the world's only two options — hitting back, or lying down — and what might a creative, nonviolent third way look like there instead?

Two things to practice. First, find your third way — name one situation where you're caught between striking back and just taking it, imagine a creative, dignity-asserting nonviolent response, and try it. Second, unclench one hand — refuse a retaliation you were owed, or give

freely to someone who asked. And the same care: if you're in danger, your third way may be to get safe and expose the harm — that's resistance, not failure.

Next time, the summit — the sixth and final contrast, the climax of it all: "love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you." The hardest and most beautiful command in the whole Sermon.

[Slow. Land it.]

For now, go and learn the third way — the narrow, shining path between the raised fist and the bowed head. Refuse to become the evil you resist, and refuse to be crushed by it. And if you're in danger, hear it again: getting safe isn't surrender. It's the resistance love requires of you now.

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Blessings, Pastor Mick Finch.