

Resistance Is Not Futile!

[Text - Matthew 5:38-48]

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Initially, when we hear Jesus' instruction, "Do not resist an evil doer," it sounds completely natural and appropriate. After all, Jesus is a person of peace - one who even refuses to resist, or let his disciples resist, those who come to arrest him and lead him to his death. However, when we consider how much time Jesus spends passionately standing-up against the evils of injustice, bigotry and oppression, there seems to me more to his instruction than meets the eye. It seems to be that what Jesus is advocating in today's reading, is that we don't resist evil *on its own terms*; that we don't allow another person's willingness to use intimidation or violence, turn us into aggressive or violent people. One thing human history consistently teaches, is that responding to violence with *more* violence, simply creates an escalating cycle of violence. So perhaps what Jesus is trying to teach us, is that the way to break the cycle of violence is to respond in a way that puts the burden back onto the aggressor - that lets our adversaries know that we will not give them the power to dictate how we will interact with them.

Jesus says, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." Back in Jesus' day, the left hand was considered - well *gauche* - inappropriate for performing routine activities. Therefore the only way someone could strike you on the right cheek, would be with the back of the right hand. Of course you don't use the back of your hand if you're really trying to clobber someone. It's intended as an insult, as a way to put a person in his or her place. A back-handed slap would be delivered by a person with power over another. In those days it might be a master to a slave, a husband to a wife, a Roman to a lowly Jew. So the strategy that Jesus proposes is, 'If anyone tries to humiliate you and put you in your place as being inferior to them, don't cower; but rather *turn the other cheek!*'

By turning the other cheek, you're saying to that bully, "I will not be intimidated by you! I am a Divinely created human being; I am an equally valued child of God! And nothing that you do to me will ever change that fact!" That other person may be in a position of authority, but that doesn't

mean that he - or she - has the power to break your spirit or. or the right to dominate your soul.

Jesus goes on to say, “If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well.” According to Deuteronomy Chapter 24, a poor person could use his coat [or outer garment] as a pledge to secure a loan. And even though the law implies that the creditor shouldn’t try to harass or embarrass the debtor, the creditor did have the right to take that coat every morning and hold as collateral, as long as he returned it each night. Technically, it was his to keep for the day; but practically it served no purpose except to humiliate the poor debtor. [“Have you got my money? No, well then give me your coat!”]

Many of the people to whom Jesus is talking would know what it’s like to live in poverty, and to have their coat taken-away on a daily basis by a mean-spirited, bullying creditor. [And we think those harassing phone calls are bad!] So Jesus tells them, ‘Look, even though the law won’t stop that wealthy person from routinely harassing you, there is something you can do to turn the tables. It may sound a bit over-the-top, but when your creditor takes your coat, *give him your cloak as well!*’

What that *means*, is handing-over your outer robe, and *then* surrendering your remaining garment - leaving you standing there wearing nothing but a smile! Imagine what a scene that would create. [Though you don’t have to image it quite that *vividly!*] Everyone in town would gather ‘round and ask, “What in the world happened to you?”

“Well, Levi the Loan-shark has my clothes!”

“What? Why he should be ashamed of himself! Just because he has money to lend doesn’t give him the right to be such a jerk! Where is that low-down louse? We’re gonna have a talk with him!”

And suddenly, the tables have turned; the power has shifted. And you can bet your shirt, that it’s going to be a long time before *any* creditor in that town takes someone’s coat to harass or belittle them. The wealthy may have tremendous resources and power at their disposal; but that doesn’t mean they can’t be powerfully challenged, even by the poorest of the poor!

Jesus continues, “If anyone forces you to go one mile, go the second mile.” Back then, the only person who could force you to go one mile was a Roman soldier. According to Roman Law anyone living in occupied territory who wasn’t a Roman citizen, could be forced to carry a soldier’s pack one mile - but no farther. Roman Law was strict, but that strictness cut both ways. There were even mile markers on the Roman roads; so if a person were forced to carry the pack *more* than one mile, that soldier could get into trouble with his commanding officer. Jesus is saying, “If a soldier forces you to carry his pack, simply cooperate [you really have little choice]. But when you come to the mile marker, *keep-on going!*”

Suddenly that soldier won’t know what to do. Usually, a person drops that pack as soon as that mile is completed; but this person is still going! And if the commander sees it, that soldier may face some serious consequences. “O.K., that’s far enough....Really, you don’t have to do this....Thanks for your help, but I’ll take it from here!” And before you know it, that mighty Roman soldier is begging a humble Jew, “Please, give me back my backpack!”

In each of these examples, Jesus shows his followers how to take the power away from the aggressor, and put pressure back onto the oppressor. Of course Jesus’ way may result in some sore cheeks from being slapped; or some red cheeks from walking around *au natural*; or some sore muscles from going that extra distance. Nevertheless, by showing the strength and resolve to resist bullying, oppression and evil - without becoming violent or evil yourself - you’re letting the oppressors *know* that they don’t have all the power. In the end, your unwavering - yet peaceful - resistance makes a stronger statement than any violent act of retaliation ever could.

Jesus clearly declares, “Do not resist an evil doer!” Then, he proceeds to cleverly lay-out some specific ways in to resist - firmly, consistently, intelligently - yet without resorting to violence or turning toward evil ourselves.

Today, as in Jesus’ day, it is critical for you and me to do something in response to bigotry and oppression, inequity and injustice. For though we can *try* to bury the frustration, and anger that we feel about the injustices that we witness - or that we experience - in *doing* so, we run the risk that those emotions will eat-away at us, and probably seep-out in unhealthy and

inappropriate ways. This is why you and I are called to trust and emulate the teachings and example of Jesus Christ:

One who passionately stands-up for the poor and oppressed, the outcast and the “outsider”;

One who holds people accountable for their actions, yet also holds forgiveness and love for them in his heart;

One who faithfully trusts that the Holy One is ultimately in charge - giving him the strength and courage to go that extra mile and to literally put his life on the line - by resisting injustice, and by promoting peace and reconciliation among all people.

It is true that Jesus didn't resist those who sought to take his life. Yet by standing firmly for Divine truth and righteousness, Jesus reveals the way to an irresistible life and love that can last beyond all time.