**Jesus Taught People How to Nonviolently Resist Oppression**

by Glen Anderson

The words here are mine. The biblical research information came from books by Walter Wink, a great biblical scholar.

The society in which Jesus lived 2,000 years ago discriminated against many kinds of people (women, foreigners, poor people, people with disabilities, and so forth).

He reached out to outsiders and outcasts with a message that affirmed and validated their essential human dignity. His appeal went far, far beyond the typical Christian theology that modern churches preach (about saving people’s souls). He taught people that God really wants an egalitarian society where every person is equal in God’s sight and all people need to be brought together in equality for a truly egalitarian society that welcomed all kinds of people.

Nowadays some people make it seem like Christianity is all about opposing abortion and homosexuality. Actually, Jesus said ABSOLUTELY NOTHING about those! The “Christians” who claim that these are Jesus’ main points are substituting their own biases instead of what Jesus actually taught. Actually, what Jesus did emphasize over and over again was his condemnation of rich people who failed to share with the poor, and elites who looked down on the outsiders.

Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5, 6, 7) includes **a sequence of three teachings – one right after another** – in which Jesus urges people to use **nonviolent resistance against oppression**. The person who wrote Matthew’s gospel combined these three teachings into this sequence in order to teach people that **Jesus was promoting nonviolent resistance against oppression**.

**These teachings (Matthew 5:38-41) made great sense to the audience at his time and place, but modern people don’t know the context.**

**Below I explain each one of Jesus’ teachings about nonviolent resistance.** You will be able to see why the authorities saw Jesus as the nonviolent revolutionary that he was, and why they killed him.

**1. Turn the other cheek:**

When Jesus told people to “turn the other cheek,” he was **NOT** telling people to let themselves get beaten up! Rather, he was showing how oppressed people can **nonviolently resist** their oppressors.

In the society where Jesus lived, people used their right hands to perform ordinary tasks, and the left hand was considered ritually impure and used for toilet functions.

Notice that in Matthew 5:39 Jesus specifies that you were struck on the **right** cheek. Notice how your hands and arms work. If someone is facing you and slaps you on your right cheek, your attacker – using his right hand – must have used the **back of his hand**. A man would use the **front** of his hand to slap a man of equal status. This means he would slap the other person’s left cheek. Since Jesus specified that you were slapped on your right cheek, this means that you were slapped by the back of the other person’s hand. This is a dismissive, oppressive gesture that an oppressor would use for slapping someone of low status (such as a woman, a child, or a slave). Jesus very often spoke to audiences of people of low status who were oppressed. They had personal experience of receiving slaps on their right cheeks by the backs of their oppressors’ hands.

When Jesus tells these oppressed people to “turn the other cheek,” they would be exposing their left cheeks for the second slap. But – because of how our arms and hands are constructed – this would require the oppressor to use the front of his hand (not the back). This kind of slap would elevate you to equal status. Therefore, “turning the other check” is a clever nonviolent way to expose the oppressor’s class-based oppression and elevate your status to that of his equal in this conflict.

**2. When the court takes your cloak:**

Right after urging this clever nonviolent strategy to resist oppression, Jesus offers another in Matthew 5:40. He says, “If anyone would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak also.” The poor people he was talking to knew exactly what this meant, but people in our time and place do not know the context from Jesus’ time and place.

Poor people were in debt and had to give their outer garments (their coats) as collateral for their loans. But their law allowed them to reclaim their coats for warmth overnight and return them to the lender the next day. Some people were so hopelessly in debt that they could never pay back their loans, so the lenders would take them to court and permanently seize their collateral – their outer coats. Then they would be cold overnight.

Jesus spoke to people who were so poor that they would never be able to repay their loans, so the lenders would take them to court and permanently seize ownership of their collateral.

So Jesus told these poor people that if the court took someone’s coat, he should also take off his cloak (the long flowing cloth that was his only other piece of clothing) and give that to the lender too. Then he’d stride out of court completely naked.

In that culture, being naked was tremendously shameful, but the same was not so much on the person who was himself naked but much more so on whoever had caused his nakedness. So when he leaves the court naked the shame would be on the lender. “First National Bank took all of my clothes.” This was a clever nonviolent way to expose systematic economic injustice and shame the lenders who were oppressing very large numbers of poor people.

**3. Go the second mile:**

Immediately after that, Jesus offered a third strategy for nonviolent resistance to oppression. Nowadays people do not know the nonviolent revolutionary meaning of “going the second mile.” People think that just doing more than expected – like a business that “goes the second mile” to provide customers with excellent service.

In Jesus’ time Jesus urged “going the second mile” as a clever form of nonviolent resistance against the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire was occupying the entire region for many years. The Roman Empire was oppressing the people but Rome was savvy enough to limit its oppression just short of the excesses that would cause the occupied people to rise up in revolution against the Roman Empire. For example, a Roman soldier could force a local subject to carry his heavy pack for one mile, but no longer, because carrying the Roman soldier’s pack for more than one mile would be too oppressive, so the Roman Empire would punish a soldier who made a local person carry his pack more than one mile.

So in Matthew 5:41, Jesus told the people that if a soldier forced you to carry his pack for one mile, carry it for a second mile too. This clever nonviolent action would expose the Roman military’s inherent oppression and get the soldier in trouble. Carrying his pack for a second mile was a clever nonviolent way to resist the Roman Empire’s oppression.

Clearly, when the Gospel of Matthew sequences these three strategies for nonviolent resistance one right after another, it is clear that Jesus was instructing the people how to nonviolently resist oppression. No wonder the authorities wanted to kill him!