

“Blessed are the Meek?” (Who Wants to Be Meek?)

Bill Chadwick, July 14, 2019

First Presbyterian Church, Stillwater, Minnesota

Text: Matthew 5:5, 38-39



Gentle Jesus, meek and mild.

But what about the cleansing of the Temple, in which Jesus overturns the tables of the moneychangers and makes a whip of cords and drives the animals out?

Why is Jesus so angry? Three things. First of all, the animals were there because Jewish law required pilgrims coming to Jerusalem for Passover to offer an animal for sacrifice, a couple of pigeons if you are poor, or a lamb or a kid (that is, a baby goat, not a child) or a calf if you have more money. Now, where was this marketplace set up? In the Temple itself? No. The “Temple” generally refers not just to the actual building, but also the courtyards which surround it. This was arranged in sort of concentric rectangles around the Temple itself. The closest area was for Jewish men. The next was for Jewish women. And then the far area (the cheap seats) was for Gentile converts. Where do you suppose the market was set up? In the Courtyard of the Gentiles. How were the Gentiles (those not born into the Jewish faith) supposed to worship with this cacophony of animals bleating and cooing and mooing and pooping? Quoting the Hebrew scriptures, Jesus cried, “My house is to be a house of prayer for all nations, but you have made it a robbers’ den” (Matthew 21:13).

Second problem. Jewish law required that the animals to be sacrificed had to be perfect, “without blemish.” You could bring your own animal from home or buy one at the Temple. The Jewish priestly establishment set up inspectors to make sure your animal qualified, blemish-free. Say that you were a shepherd and you decided to bring your own lamb from home for the sacrifice, you might have to drive it perhaps ten miles or thirty miles or fifty miles to Jerusalem without it getting even a little nick. Not easy to do. And even if you do manage to get it there unharmed, the inspectors are likely to find something you didn’t see, or perhaps even surreptitiously make a little nick in the animal’s leg, so they can sell you one of their animals, at a highly inflated price. It was a monopoly under the control of the High Priest. Cheating the common person.

Third, what’s the deal with the moneychangers? Well, the Temple tax of a half-shekel (about two days’ wages) had to be offered in a certain currency, so most people had to exchange their money for that currency. As any of us who have travelled internationally know, different places offer different exchange rates. We know not to exchange at our hotel. We go to the exchange office down the street for a better rate. But the only place for the pilgrims to exchange is at the Temple. This again is a monopoly; the moneychangers are making an exorbitant profit and the poor people are getting ripped off.

So, Jesus saw that the Gentiles had no good place to worship, the poor people were getting cheated by both the animal sellers and moneychangers and it fried his potatoes. So he took action, overthrowing the tables of the moneychangers and driving out the animals.

Now let’s go back to our first scripture passage, “Blessed are the meek.” Meek is not a word we encounter much today. Would you like to be called “meek”? Why not? We don’t want to be pushovers, Casper Milquetoasts. We take assertiveness training to avoid being meek. “Stand up for yourself!” “Get in there and fight!”

Meek. Well, we’ve got a bit of a translation problem. The Greek word that gets translated as “Meek” is *praus*. Translating “praus” as “meek” goes all the way back to the King James Version in the 1600s when the English word “meek” did *not* mean “weak.”

William Barclay notes the interesting history of the word. (1) It is used “to describe an animal which has been tamed and domesticated...” (*The Beatitudes and the Lord’s Prayer for Everyman*, p. 40), such as a horse that has been gentled (a word I like much better than “broken,”) or a hunting dog who won’t run ahead 200 yards and scare all the pheasants up out of range, but is in the willing control of the master. A *person* who is *praus* is under control of the Master.

A second definition of one who is *praus* describes the person who has it within his or her power to act with severity, but who chooses to act with gentleness. “It is the gentleness of strength.” (*Ibid.*, p. 41)

But my favorite definition of this word *praus* that we mistranslate “meek” is that it describes the person who is never angry at the wrong time, but always angry at the right time. That is a valuable quality.

What would be the wrong time to be angry? When someone cuts you off in traffic, big deal. Some slight that happens to us. Who cares? Is this going to matter in a year?

When is the right time to be angry? When the powerless are being mistreated. When billions are spent on war-making while children go hungry and homeless. When refugee children are held in cages on our border. When gay or trans teens are bullied to the point of suicide.

Or...Jesus throwing the moneychangers out of the Temple courtyard. Jesus was angry! “Be angry,” said the writer of Ephesians, “but do not sin” (4:26).

Anger is a God-given emotion. Let us use it wisely: when God would have us be angry, when the poor and powerless are mistreated! Let us not use our anger to scream and shout. Let our anger be a motivator to do justice.

But how does this all fit with what Jesus says a few verses later in Matthew, about “turning the other cheek”? Biblical scholar Walter Wink did a marvelous exegesis of this passage in a lecture I was privileged to attend a number of years ago.

First, we have a translation problem again. Our English translations usually read, “You have heard ‘an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,’ but I say do not resist an evildoer.”

That always seemed strange to me, because Jesus was resisting evildoers all the time: throwing out the moneychangers, saving the woman caught in adultery from being killed, casting out demons, speaking out against injustices and oppression. What do you mean, “Do not resist an evildoer”?

The problem is in the word translated “resist.” In the Greek, it is “antistani.” “Anti” means “against” and “stani” “to stand.” In every other instance, both in scripture and in Greek literature, that we find the word “antistani,” it means not just “resist,” but specifically to “resist militarily, with force and violence.” One army will “antistani” (stand against) another army. The word for “riot” is *stasis*,” coming from the same root as “stani.”

What Jesus was saying was “do not resist *violently*.” Do not respond in kind to the one who is being violent against you. Jesus, in cleansing the Temple, did not harm any people physically.

Okay, then what do we do? Run away?

In most of human history, both before and since Jesus, we have chosen one or two options: fight or flight. In fact, that has become the name for that adrenaline surge that rushes through our body in times of

danger, the “fight or flight syndrome.” Adrenaline courses through our bodies, we have more strength, our senses all go on full battle station alert, and we are ready to fight... or flee as fast as our legs will take us.

Now, that has served individuals well over the course of history. Through the millennia those who have been good at fighting and/or fleeing have lived to pass on their genes, so that by Jesus’ day those were very powerful impulses, as they continue to be today for us.

But Jesus was saying in essence, “It’s time to use our intellect and our courage to counter evil in a creative, *new* way, neither fight nor flight.” So first, a translation problem. Jesus does not say, “Do not resist evil.” He says, “Do not *violently* resist evil.”

The second key: remember who Jesus’ audience is. Who is that “you” when Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said,...but I tell you...”? The audience listening to Jesus was primarily made up of the losers in that society: the powerless, the poor, slaves, women, fishermen, shepherds, peasants.

Third, we don’t understand the radical nature of what Jesus was saying until we understand the culture.

Now I need a volunteer.

Did Jesus say, “If someone hits you on the cheek, turn the other”?

No. Almost! But I left out one vitally important word. Jesus said, “If someone hits you on the *right* cheek...” The key to the whole passage.

How can you hit me on the right cheek?

Of course, a left hook.

But in that society, you can’t use your left hand that way. Why not? The left hand was reserved for unclean things. No toilet paper. So your left hand is physically unclean and ritually unclean. Thus, in Jesus’ time you can’t do anything else with your left hand, not even gesture. (Wink’s lecture.)

So, in that culture, you simply cannot use your left hand to punch me. So how can you strike me on the right cheek with your right hand? Backhanded. That’s the only way. Now, is he going to really try and clobber me as hard as he can with his right hand? No. It’s obviously a backhanded slap to which Jesus is referring when he says, “If you are struck on the *right* cheek...”

The backhand is, in many ways, worse than getting punched, isn’t it? It’s the ultimate insult. And who backhands whom? Who could do that to another person? Master to a slave. Husband to a wife (in that society). Boss to worker. Parent to child. Always a superior to an inferior for the backhand. And remember Jesus’ audience – the bottom rung of society.

Never was the backhand given to peers, your equals, as we can see from some of the rabbinical writings in the Jewish Mishnah. The Mishnah said that if two peers are fighting in the street and one punches the other, the first must pay a penalty of four zuzim, four days’ wages. If a man slaps a peer with an open hand, he has to pay a penalty of 200 zuzim. And if you *backhand* a peer, your social equal, the penalty is 400 zuzim. Over a year’s wages! So the backhanded slap wasn’t done. Between peers.

It’s the worst possible insult. Now, we know about this from movies set in olden days. Aristocrats then didn’t even deign to use their own flesh on the other person. They used the glove. And if one aristocrat

did that to another aristocrat, there was only one way to save one's honor: a duel. Nothing short of killing would do, because the backhand says, "You are not my peer, you are a *peasant, a nothing!*"

But there is no penalty, in the Middle Ages or in Jesus' day, if you backhand an inferior. That was part of the culture. You are my slave. I can backhand you.

Now, if I backhand you, hit you on the right cheek, what does Jesus say to do? "Turn the other cheek as well." Now what do I do? Backhand him again? As Wink said, "I'm not going to backhand him again. It's like telling a joke. You either get it the first time or not." What can I do? I can hit him with my right hand like a *peer*. That's the only option. (*Volunteer sits down.*)

In turning the other cheek, he's not *avoiding* trouble! If he's my slave and he does this, I am likely to beat him within an inch of his life, or even kill him. But he is saying, by turning the other cheek, "You can't treat me like dirt... I will not put a knife in you while you sleep. But you cannot treat me like dirt like you always have. I am a human being. You must respond to me as a human being."

It's the exact *opposite* of being a doormat! It takes *more* courage than merely taking it *or* fighting back!

For centuries and centuries, the subordinates bowed and scraped when given the backhand, physically or symbolically, and submerged themselves back into the hierarchical structure. Or they rose up and killed their oppressors.

Jesus offers a third way which insures the dignity and humanity of both parties. The subordinate insists, "I am a human being." But the subordinate does *NOT* kill or in other ways rob the master of *his* humanity.

When Jesus was about to be arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter pulled out his sword. In exasperation, Jesus said, "Oh, for Pete's sake!" (You always wondered where that phrase came from.) Put away your sword, Peter. Don't you know I could call down twelve legions of angels to fight for me?" Responding with violence was not Jesus' way. Jesus preached—and lived—this Third Way.

It's precisely the way chosen by Martin Luther King, Jr. No longer can you treat us like we're subhuman; but we won't fight you with violence. We will defeat you with suffering love, as Jesus defeated his enemies through suffering love.

In our own lives today, how can we "turn the other cheek"? When we are treated with the symbolic "backhand" we are commanded by Jesus to insist on being treated with dignity, without responding in ways that rob the other of his or her humanity.

Wink used the example that over the years thousands of women have gone to their pastors with stories of being beaten by their husbands and thousands of pastors have counseled them to return to their husbands, "turning the other cheek." Totally missing the point of what Jesus was saying. Perhaps the woman needs to go to the police. Perhaps that is the only way the husband will get the help he needs to stop the cycle of violence. Maybe something else needs to be tried. Each circumstance is unique.

This Third Way is a way of great courage...and of great cost. It is the way of the Cross...the way of the Christ.

May we be faithful. Amen?