

The Things That Make for Peace

Participant Resource: Bible Study Session 3



Title: Practicing Peace—“So that you may work for justice, freedom, and peace.”

Texts: Matthew 5:38–42

Goal for the Session: Participants will explore Matthew 5:38–42 as a basis for active nonviolence and consider their response to it

What does it mean to “turn the other cheek?” What is the difference between being a doormat and choosing nonviolence? Based on the scholarship of Walter Wink, this study will explore Matthew 5:38–46 as a foundation for active nonviolence.

“So that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.”

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘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 wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.**”*

What is important to know?

We will be looking at Matthew 5:38–42 through the scholarship of the late Walter Wink, who taught biblical interpretation at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York City for more than 30 years. Among his many publications is the book *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium*, published in 1998. His scholarship is still contributing to theological discussion about peace and war. In a world where the myth of redemptive violence is perpetuated at every turn, it is important for Christians to consider more than the traditional pacifist and just war theories. Through the example of Jesus, we are invited into the words of Jesus in a potentially life-changing third way, that of active nonviolent resistance.

Most Christians agree that Jesus was not a warrior. Nor was he a doormat. Although he took humility to a heartbreaking level—willingly submitting to crucifixion—we also observe him challenging the political and religious powers through his gracious and empowering treatment of women, prostitutes, tax collectors, the poor, and lepers, to name just a few. He also aligned himself with the prophet Isaiah, proclaiming,

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the
poor.
He has sent me to proclaim
release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the
blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the
Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18–19)*

This is hardly a call to “give in to evil.” So the question persists: What did Jesus mean when he said, “Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other also”? Is it a call to be passive in the face of injustice, abuse, and marginalization?

This study looks at these words within the context of the first century to see if there is another approach to the passage. Enter into it with an open mind, and see if you encounter Jesus a little differently.

Cultural Context First Century Palestine

- The Roman Empire, which spread all the way into Africa, controlled Palestine in the first century. The government allowed Jewish life and governance to continue—under Rome’s watchful eye—as long as revenues were collected and the people remained compliant with their Roman occupiers.
- Palestinians were heavily taxed, creating a situation where poverty was a severe problem. The Roman court system was flooded with people taking advantage of every economic class. According to some sources, the wealthy were taxed 25 percent and more to fund wars, and many households were driven into debt while trying to retain the rights to their land.¹ The poor were often left with little more than the clothing on their backs.

“Turn the other [the left cheek] also.” (v. 39)

- In Jewish culture, the left hand was only used for “unclean tasks”. In the Qumran In Jewish culture, the left hand was only used for “unclean” tasks. In the Qumran community (at the time of Jesus), gesturing with the left hand meant exclusion from the

community for 100 days.

- It was shameful to “backhand” someone unless the person was of a lower class than the perpetrator. It was used to humiliate or insult.

“Give your cloak as well.” (v. 40)

- Deuteronomy 24:10–13 allowed a creditor to take a person’s outer robe as collateral for repayment of a loan.
- Clothing was simple for common people. Peasants wore an outer coat and an under cloak (their undergarments).
- Middle Eastern culture of the day was shame-based. Nakedness was particularly shameful, more so for the one observing the nakedness than for the one without clothing.

“Go the second mile.” (v. 41)

Roman officers regularly enlisted people to carry their packs so they did not have to. At any time, people could be recruited to do work for the Romans. Some officers had mules to carry their packs, but many defaulted to people.

- It was a common practice for a soldier to recruit someone for one mile before allowing them to return and continue with their day.

Biblical context

- This passage comes in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, the most extensive teaching of Jesus found in the Bible. Through much of it, he offers an alternative reading of living as a faithful Jew. He looks at the law and reorients his listeners to the heart and intent behind the law.
- The Greek word translated “resist” in 5:39 is *antistenai*, literally “to stand against.” It was also used in the Hebrew Scriptures as a word for warfare. In Ephesians 6:13, which discusses the “whole armor of God,” the same word is used, there translated, “to withstand evil.”

What does this mean for our lives?

When we read Scripture, it is important that we ask questions when something doesn’t seem consistent with other portions of Scripture. It is also important that when we accept a particular interpretation, we remain open to other interpretations of the same texts. Scripture itself rarely gives us the cultural context, so referring to scholars is important for a full knowledge of scriptural interpretation.

What are we called to do?

We are called to be peacemakers by pursuing active nonviolence in the way of Christ. As peacemakers, we are neither conflict avoiders nor called to “force” justice. Jesus gives the ultimate model for nonviolent resistance, loving change, and self-giving humility. We are called to follow this Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

Personal Reflection

Benediction of St. Francis

May God bless you with discomfort
At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,
So that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger
At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,
So that you may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless you with tears
To shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, hunger,
and war.
So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them
and
To turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness
To believe that you can make a difference in the world,
So that you can do what others claim cannot be done

To bring justice and kindness to all our children and
the poor.
Amen.

Endnotes

1. Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be* (New York: Doubleday, 1998) p.98-111