

The Things That Make for Peace

Leaders Guide: Bible Study Session 3



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

Text: 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 5:38–42 as a foundation for active nonviolence.

*“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.**”*

Preparing for the Session

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
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He has sent me to proclaim
release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the
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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 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 Preparation

Find a quiet place to pray for the study, and invite the Holy Spirit to open your eyes and the eyes of all participants to find God’s grace and peace with this study. Read the entire passage twice.

Sometime before the study, be sure you practice the “turning the left cheek” role-play portion of the study. It is critical that you be clear how it is not possible to strike the right cheek without backhanding someone.

You Will Need the Following:

- The full passage either written at a size all in the room can read or projected to sufficient size
- Three to five readers
- Write the three phrases of cultural information on separate pieces of paper and give the information to three people ahead of time
- (If you choose the second option for the gathering) Write on different sheets of 8” x 10” colored paper the following words: *doormat*, *gullible*, *forgiving*, *generous*, *intentional*, and *spineless*. Tape them at different places around the room at eye level.

Leading the Session

Gathering

Last week we considered how to “live deeper in our hearts” as peacemakers. Did you try anything new this week? Have you gained inspiration to try something new in your pursuit of spiritual well-being? Did you have opportunity to connect with your partner? How did that go?

Brainstorm: Today we will look at a very familiar passage in a little different light. When you hear “turn the other cheek,” what words come to mind? Write these words up on one side of the room. It is probable that words like *doormat*, *gullible*, *unhealthy*, *spineless*, and *sucker* will arise, as will more positive words like *generous*, *principled*, and *forgiving*.

-or-

With the words *doormat*, *gullible*, *forgiving*, *generous*, *intentional*, and *spineless* taped at different places around the room at eye level, read the passage:

"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."

Using the following question and guidance, invite participants to respond: "When you hear this passage, which of these words best describes your predominant response to it? Go to the word that best fits." Invite one from each group to respond. After responses are made, invite participants to return to their seats.

Exploring the Word

Read the passage in its entirety by sharing in reading it phrase by phrase.

"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."

If taken as it has sometimes been interpreted, this passage implies that Jesus was advising his followers to give in to evil. This interpretation suggests that Jesus didn't take evil very seriously. On the contrary, his very message was about a way to defeat evil.

Provide participants with the cultural context.

Cultural Context of First-Century Palestine (from above)

- 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. The wealthy were taxed 25 percent to 250 percent to fund wars, and many households were driven into debt while trying to retain the rights to their land.² The poor were often left with little more than the clothing on their backs.

"But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also."

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."

Have the first reader read the cultural context on "turn the other [the left cheek] also" (v. 39).

- 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.

Role Play: Invite two people to participate in a role play to enact this scene. Person one is a Roman soldier. Person two is a Jewish man or woman. Read the passage slowly, asking the two to play their parts (without actually hitting). The soldier is the perpetrator.

"If anyone strikes you on your right cheek"—What does this require of the one striking in order to hit the other's right cheek? (That the person uses his or her left hand.) But we read earlier that the left hand is not used, as it is to be used only for personal purposes.

The only way to strike someone's right cheek is in the situation of a superior hitting a person of inferior status (a backhand). If Jesus had been referring to equals, he would have said that the left cheek was the first to be slapped.

What have we discovered?

1. Jesus was speaking to a Jewish people under Roman occupation.
2. In speaking of being slapped on the right cheek, Jesus was referring to a higher status person slapping someone of lower status.

Question: Why did Jesus teach them to turn the other cheek?

(Ask your actors to enact the second part of the scene—namely, the person turning the other cheek.)

By telling the people to turn the other cheek, Jesus was telling the victim to call out the reality of the unjustness and unfairness of the system. It would likely surprise the person who had struck the left cheek to be told, "Go ahead, slap the other one." So, Jesus was not advising his followers to submit themselves in a masochistic fashion. Nor were they being encouraged to turn the other cheek so they could be abused even more. He was more likely saying, "Stand up with your dignity and expose evil. And do it with restraint."

"If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well."

Invite the second reader to read the cultural context of "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.

Read the statement "If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well."

In light of this information, consider the following questions for discussion.

Break into four groups to consider these questions.

-or-

Share together in discussing a few of these questions, as much as time allows.

1. Was Jesus speaking to wealthy people? (Unlikely, if the creditor accepted the debtor's coat as collateral for payment of the loan.)
2. What do you imagine would happen in a courthouse if the judge ruled that the debtor must leave his coat and the debtor responds by offering his undergarments as well? (Laughter? Worry that the debtor would shed his clothes?) How would the judge see this? (As making a mockery of the system?) How would the creditor see this? (As a public embarrassment?)
3. What would the debtor accomplish? (She or he would expose the failure of the Roman taxation system and the greed of the creditor).
4. Do you think this reflects a "doormat" theology? Why or why not? What is Jesus possibly proposing here? (That using humor and the threat of shame can empower the oppressed).

Read the statement "If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile."

Ask the third reader to share the relevant cultural background information: Roman officers regularly

enlisted people to carry their packs for them. It was one way they asserted their power over local inhabitants. At any time, they could be recruited to do work for the Romans. (Remember Simon of Cyrene, who was pulled from the crowd to carry the cross of Jesus.)

Questions to consider:

1. In light of the other two reflections, what do you think Jesus might have been suggesting? (To be willing to give extra to prove their love? To be willing to walk the second mile to show the soldier that they shouldn't have to carry their load at all?)
2. What good would it do for the one forced to carry a pack one mile to volunteer to carry it another? How might the Roman soldier feel?
3. In what way might Jesus be encouraging his followers to active nonviolent resistance?
4. Why would someone being forced to walk a mile out of their way carrying a soldier's bag ask to carry it another mile?

Reflecting on the Word

Gather participants into groups of four or five. Ask each group to rewrite the passage in their own words, taking into consideration the lesson. There will likely be lingering questions, and this is a good place to continue discussion.

Responding to the Word

Give the group five minutes of silence to write about their personal experiences going through the passage. What new thing are they considering that they hadn't before? Encourage each to think of other leaders who have used nonviolent resistance to accomplish their purposes while staying true to their faith.

-or-

If you used the introduction where participants were invited to choose which word most described "turn the other cheek," have participants choose again and explain why their opinion was the same or changed. Add other words as people find them.

Closing the Session

Sing the song "Make Me a Channel of Your Peace" (#2171, *Sing the Faith*) or one of your choosing.

Invite participants to pray in unison the Benediction of St. Francis, printed on the Participant Resource.

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.

Preparing for Session 4:

Extending Peace—“*So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them*”

Read Hebrews 13:1–3 and Romans 12:13–21.

Consider these questions:

1. How is hospitality related to peacemaking?
2. How quick am I to be available to people who aren't in my immediate circle?

Endnotes

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

Going Deeper

Begin a book group studying *The Powers That Be*, by Walter Wink.

Borrow *A Force More Powerful*, a documentary with five 30–40 minute sections on successful nonviolent movements in history, from the library or your local Fellowship of Reconciliation chapter. For more information, visit www.aforcemorepowerful.org.

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

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Personal Reflection

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