

Holy Non-Compliance: Protesting the kingdom of darkness by Charlie Carron

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Let's read the words of Jesus.

³⁸ "You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹ But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also. ⁴⁰ If you are sued in court and your shirt is taken from you, give your coat, too. ⁴¹ If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles. ⁴² Give to those who ask, and don't turn away from those who want to borrow.

⁴³ "You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbour' and hate your enemy. ⁴⁴ But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! ⁴⁵ In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven.

Three vignettes: 'The Other Cheek', 'The Extra Mile' and 'Your Coat, Also.'

These are an introduction to Jesus' philosophy of power.

Of the three, going the extra mile feels the most intuitive to British Christian culture, doesn't it?

Many of us are used to overextending ourselves for others, especially if we've grown up in church culture, which rewards this kind of behaviour with social status and good reputation.

Any people-pleasers in the house? "Such a lovely, servant-hearted guy."

Not that we shouldn't serve others – sacrifice is at the core of life with God, a non-negotiable – but each of these illustrations from Jesus' sermon are really about the subversion of evil.

By subversion, I mean to rebel against and actively undermine.

A plain understanding of the 'Other Cheek', the 'Extra Mile' and 'Your Coat Also' frames these three scenes as passivity in practise.

Verse 39: "Do not resist an evil person." This is often misinterpreted. In the wrong hands, this verse could be used to justify silence and shame for a victim of evil and has been deployed, tragically, in church history to coerce people and conceal the truth.



Better reading:

“Don’t respond to evil in kind.”

“Don’t respond to evil with violence.”

BUT – Jesus’ teaching here demands a response nonetheless.

We’ll come to see that passivity is never an option in Jesus’ way of operating.

1) The Other Cheek

Notice Jesus says “if someone strikes your RIGHT cheek…”

Imagine a master and a servant in a household in first-century Near East. Should the master decide to strike their servant, they would never use their left hand – this was used only for unclean tasks (‘the poo hand’).

This leaves the option of either a right-handed forehand or a right-handed backhand to the face of their servant.

A forehand strike – either a slap with the palm or a punch – is how one would fight with an equal. This is therefore not an option for a master who wishes to assert their power over a lowly servant.

So, the master would most likely have used the back of their right hand to strike the right cheek of the servant. Underlining disdain for, and dominance over, the serving classes.

In turning the left cheek and offering it to their master, the servant in Jesus’ example is giving his master a choice: strike me with your forehand and mark me as your equal OR strike me with your unclean hand and dishonour yourself.

Do you see how subversive this is to Jesus’ audience? He is encouraging his followers to expose evil, not with violence or retaliation, but a kind of prophetic non-compliance with the power imbalances they’re experiencing.

In my Church of England Junior School assemblies, I was told turning the other cheek meant not retaliating or responding when Mitchell Gregory covered his hands with his sleeves, picked a bunch of stinging nettles and pressed them against my eyeballs. But that wasn’t a Christianity built on the words and meaning of Christ; it was a Christianity built on the culture of the British stiff upper lip.

(And teachers who just wanted to eat their lunch without mediating children’s disputes).

It is affable, polite and utterly useless in the Kingdom of God.

The Other Cheek is a parable about powerfully and creatively restoring the dignity of the oppressed party while holding up a mirror to evil.



2) Your coat, also.

If you were destitute in those days and that legal system, you might put up your cloak as collateral for a loan. The history behind this illustration is that people were hiking up interest rates and taking land from the poor. Jesus is responding to a social situation of vile injustice.

And he's saying: "Next time you're sued in court for your shirt, give your cloak (coat) too."

At which his first-century Jewish audience would laugh uproariously because he's being A) very funny and B) quite shocking; at this time, if a man took off both his shirt and his outer garment, he'd be naked.

In that Semitic world, shame does not fall on the person who is naked, but on the one who beholds them. If I took off all my clothes now, the consequences are with me and you could reasonably press charges.

But in those days and in that place, you'd all be the disgusting ones. It was generally accepted that if someone was naked in public, it's probably because something has gone wrong in their life – perhaps sexual violence, poverty or mental illness.

The responsibility was on those witnessing that vulnerability to cover their indignity. And if they didn't, they were considered dishonourable.

Think about how nuts this is. Jesus tells his followers to go into a court of law in a strictly Orthodox Jewish culture and say to all assembled: "You're suing me down to my garments? Then take everything. Expose me. Make me naked and destitute in front of our community. I dare you. And shame on you if you choose to do so."

This is about exposing the reality of evil and holding up a mirror to it. Demonstrating the dishonour of those who will willingly take anything from the poor in their greed.

3) The Extra Mile.

In Roman military law, a soldier could make a civilian carry his pack, but only for one mile. So, by carrying a soldier's pack for the second mile, the soldier is suddenly in contravention of his own legal system.

Going the extra mile is not about being super nice to everyone and volunteering to help at Brownies. It is about exposing the inconsistencies of an evil empire which has invaded your home, stolen your resources and oppressed your nation. Everyone Jesus is speaking to would have known someone who'd been killed by Romans.

This is one heck of a gauntlet he's laying down. One of the most challenging teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. LOVE YOUR ENEMIES.

Why? These are creative responses which 1) restore the humanity and dignity of the oppressed party, 2) expose the face of evil and 3) gives room for the wrongdoer to experience repentance.

Video: Yulia Navalnaya. European Parliament. "Innovate". "Stop being boring."

She gets it.



I'm not well-read or qualified enough to wade into a debate on Christian Pacifism today.

I have friends who would vehemently hold a position that Christians should never use violence in any form, but should follow the way of the cross in every circumstance – like Christ, absorbing violence onto the Self before wielding it against others. (Even in a home break-in).

I also know Christians who serve in the armed forces, protecting the interests of our state.

But in my heart I'm a pastor, so while others might be able to say terrifically interesting things about the subversion of power structures by nonviolent resistance, I'm ultimately interested in you – your life, your family, your hopes and your FEARS.

And fear is most crucial here. Because Jesus is trying to show us a path between the violence of 'fight' and the passivity of 'flight.'

These three vignettes – the Other Cheek, the Extra Mile and Your Coat, Also – they're about fear. They're about the ways we respond when something makes us feel small. When something threatens to take our power and control from us.

And that could be structural oppression or poverty. It probably was for the people Jesus was talking to on the mountain. But for me and probably for you this is about the ways in which anxiety saturates our culture and cripples us from living truly loving lives.

Much of modern life feels addictive, fear-driven and disempowering. And it's been designed that way; the companies that produce our food, develop our technology and manufacture our goods have discovered infinite ways to keep us coming back for more, regardless of the impact on our health and wellbeing.

Eric Sevareid (1964). "The biggest big business in America today is not steel, automobiles, or television. It is the manufacture, refinement, and distribution of anxiety."

A newsreader watching his industry embrace fear and sensationalism and division in the name of ratings and profit. A salesman of anxiety becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the wares he's peddling.

And frankly I think they've only got better at it since then.

Bernays, Maxwell, Murdoch, Zuckerberg, Jobs: all built mass media empires on broken, anxious brains and the politics of anger.

Let's talk about our young people. (My background is in social work – adolescent mental health and substance misuse).

I'm devastated by the burden they bear in their bodies because of their cultural values we've come to accept as normal.

Tell a teenager that they're ugly or incomplete and they'll feel shame for a long time. But relentlessly internalise that shame with an avalanche of images and messages that rewires their very neurology and you'll make them feel ugly and incomplete for a lifetime.



And then they're right where you want them. They'll pay almost anything to feel whole.

I've been reading this week about the ways that the human survival story has formed us for Fight or Flight. How we often find it hard to have an imagination for the kinds of responses Jesus is calling for here.

And it's got me thinking about the ways that, at our core, even our most useful skills or attributes are often shaped by fear.

Compliance. Courtesy. Good manners. Appeasement. Many of us reach adulthood and find that, on reflection, some of these traits can be traced back to times of fear and anxiety – usually in childhood – that created an adaptation in us.

Something took our power and made us feel small, so our brains formed a strategy to avoid that feeling. And that forms a person who would rather try to please everyone than disappoint anyone.

Lots of Christians, especially post-COVID, are having to address the relationship they've formed with serving on rotas in churches in a cycle of joyless giving.

Similarly, the 'Fight' response will shape our attributes and competencies, too. I once heard someone say that an 'authoritarian leadership style' is simply a very useful tool for tricky situations, to be used sparingly and then placed back in the toolbox at the end of the day.

But it's worth at least asking: "By whom has that tool been sharpened? And upon which stone? Where did I learn to rule and dominate people so effortlessly? Was this formed in love, or in fear and loneliness and shame?"

Which of our formative coping mechanisms are now character traits that others would celebrate in us if they didn't know any better?

This is where repentance must be more than a prayer that we pray or words that we say. Repentance is not an apology or a confession or a promise to do better.

This isn't new information for you, but prayer isn't 'Thank You, Sorry, Please.'

Repentance = a "TURN" to be more fully human. To more fully realise the Image of God in me.

Ultimately, Jesus is giving examples of how he wants his followers to live prophetically in this world. (Not prophetic in the sense of predictions or insights, but prophetic in the old-fashioned sense – revealing truth as God sees it, particularly where injustice is concerned).

In the OT, prophets weren't just called to say words or predict things. They were called to live in a way that revealed the height, breadth, width and depth of the love of God. (See Hosea's marriage to Gomer).

The three vignettes are not just advocating non-violence. They're about living a life filled with prophetic possibility. They're about living in a way which challenges and exposes a culture of fear and offers a different, dissident way of living from what's cultural dominant.



We are not a prophetic community just because sometimes we have encouraging prophetic words for each other – sorry.

That's not it. A prophetic life is one that reveals an alternative reality rooted in God's goodness, even when it's ridiculed or diminished or seemingly futile in the face of the way everyone else is living.

A truly prophetic way of living lays down a gauntlet to the strongholds of the culture and says, "There is another way of living that is richer and more beautiful than you have yet found."

Not enslaved to the fear-mongering of our politics. Not enslaved to the mortgage. Not enslaved to screen time or pornography or the lifestyle standards of Mark Zuckerberg's relentlessly cutthroat profiteering conglomerate that I won't name.

These kinds of Creative Prophetic Acts, or Acts of Holy Non-Compliance, show my children and your children that, yes, there is a way of living in this world that is fully immersed in the love and the values of God. A way of LIVING like that, not just TELLING them facts about God and then getting all annoyed when they reject it as just words or a fantasy.

We moved into a big, dirty community house two years ago because a lot of people in this city are lonely and a lot of our peers deeply believe that the best way to live is to buy a house, dress it up as a reflection of your cool and unique personality and live there with your family until you die of too much joy.

Yulia Navalnaya is right: We cannot be boring. And we must be active innovators in this space – as a community, we need to meet and plan new ways of living out what is ancient and true.

No one who was ever successful in this kind of innovation – Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, Polycarp – no one ever did this stuff by accident or without unceasing prayer and experimentation.

And no one ever did it without the companionship of God.

MINISTRY TIME:

1 min silence.

The anxious sensations I feel in my body are not to be feared. In many ways they are no different to feelings of hunger; a physiological response to a psychological perception of threat or lack. Hunger AND anxiety are both important, noteworthy feelings which deserve my attention. They are, after all, rooted in survival and we are hardwired to listen to them. But they are simply internal alarm bells, a signal of unmet need somewhere beneath. Perhaps fear. Perhaps shame. Perhaps loneliness. Perhaps stress or overstimulation.

Come, Holy Spirit. Teach me that I can sit still with these sensations and sit still with You. I believe there is little to fear from my longings and unmet needs, except when I start to believe that they must be fulfilled by other things.



Come, Holy Spirit. Show me that you can meet my loneliness and cover my shame.

Come, Holy Spirit. Reveal to us as a community how we can live in a creatively prophetic way. We need your insight and genius, your encouragement.

Come, Holy Spirit. Give us courage and companionship as we face the ways in which fear has formed us. Help us turn to you, submit to you and honour you. Make us brave enough to hold a mirror up to the evil in this world and tender enough to love our enemies and seek their flourishing.

