

**Another Way**  
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**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
**February 19, 2017**  
**Matthew 5:38-48**

I've never spent much time in Mississippi or Alabama, or even South Georgia. But they say the August air in those places is thick and unrelenting. If that air is any kin to North Carolina's, then I don't doubt it. Summer humidity has a way of hanging all over us. The heat smacks us in the face when we walk outside, and it climbs right on top of our backs – it clings to us, pulling and sucking and draining the energy out of us with every step we take. It dominates us, victimizes us even. It removes our desire to be actively engaged in anything. In some cases, it leaves us feeling helpless. And we simply melt into submission.

But one thing's for certain, you can't fight heat with heat. It takes something entirely different – it takes cooling power. And not just any kind of cooling power will do – you need creative cooling power. My grandfather believed that A/C alone couldn't beat a heat wave – he believed it required eating ice cream by the gallon in your boxer shorts. Toddlers beat the heat by playing with Fisher-Price toys in kitchen sinks turned into makeshift swimming pools. And everybody knows the real purpose of fire hydrants in New York City – they aren't for fires, they are for hot summer days!

First-century Palestinians endured something just as oppressive as the heat: Rome. And just like August humidity, the Roman Empire was a constant, immovable force weighing down on their lives: it subdued, it embarrassed, it controlled, it manipulated, it de-humanized, it stripped power from all in its wake.

The Roman system of submission was one of violence and cruelty. Retribution was swift. And the oppressors used force to remind their subjects of their power and might.

The master could strike the slave across the cheek. The creditor could extract the outer cloak of his debtor if his debts were not paid. The Roman soldier could conscript non-Romans to carry his pack for a mile. All of these were not-so-subtle reminders of who was in charge and who wasn't. Rome's just bigger than you, so you'd better get used to it!!!

Jesus lived in the midst of Rome's oppression. But he decided he would no longer allow himself to be crushed by the weight of Rome's authority. He decided to resist. And he invited others to join him.

Too often, Jesus' words are misconstrued, and the idea of turning the other cheek is reduced to a weak form of passive resistance. It was anything but.

Jesus knew that oppressors and bullies expect two kind of responses to violent action: 1) to have their violence met with violence or 2) to respond to violence with total submission. If you fight them, they'll enjoy it because, eventually, their strength will outlast yours. And if you submit, that's even better. Rome needs to go on about its business, and besides, who doesn't love humiliation at another's expense?

Jesus tells the disciples, and all those folks listening on the Mount, and even us as well, that there's another way. Stop accepting the rules of this system. If someone strikes you on the left cheek, offer your right cheek as well. When the creditor comes to collect your outer garment, shaming you in public,

offer him your under garment as well. And when the soldier asks you to carry his pack one mile, say to him, "Oh no sir, I insist, let me carry it two miles."

This is not submission. And this is not cowardice. This is refusing to participate in a system that perpetuates violence, greed, and evil. This is the idea that people determine they will no longer be victims. And this is the idea that violence will no longer be fought with violence.

And here's the effect: the oppressor becomes confused. "You are not supposed to act this way," they say. "If you hit me back we're even. And if you accept your social position, then I can move and not feel burdened by your distress. But you've chosen a creative response. By not hitting me back, you've taken a higher moral ground. And by not simply accepting your predicament, you've asserted your dignity. And now it isn't me who is shaming you, but rather you who are shaming me. And now, I too, must re-evaluate this system, and the role I play in it.

When Rosa Parks refused to leave her seat in the front of an Alabama bus, she turned the other cheek. She protested against a system that was bent on stripping her of her dignity. When John Lewis marched palms open in to the police batons of Selma, he too turned the other cheek. And he objected to violent, greedy, evil oppression. Parks, and Lewis, and millions upon millions of African Americans created the Civil Rights Movement which disrupted the order of the day. A kind of chaos was formed where White Americans were forced to see their shame, and their part, whether intentional or not, in a system that oppressed its neighbors.

And that word neighbor is important. Notice I did not say enemy. Jesus notes that we should pray for both our neighbor and our enemy. But what he's really saying is that everyone is our neighbor. Jesus preached a kingdom, -- in Matthew's Gospel it's called the Kingdom of Heaven -- where every person's worth and dignity is in no way related to the material things of this world: skin color, wealth, sexuality, citizenship status, age. Instead, this kingdom acknowledges a person's worth by one single criteria: child of God.

And Jesus understood Torah to be a guide in the creation of neighbors. The Ten Commandments were not an unobtainable ceiling, but instead, they were a basic threshold. Don't just not kill, or not steal, or not covet, but don't allow your relationships to fester with anger, or hate, or jealousy. Instead, do the things you must to create healthy, trustworthy relationships. Love others. Pray for others. Treat them as you would want to be treated. For if you do, the world will not be one of friends and enemies, but rather it will be a neighborhood.

Friends, it's no use fighting heat with heat. And friends, it's no use fighting hate with hate. Jesus instructs us to love our neighbors.

And here lies the challenge for each of us as we leave here today. There will be times when must turn our cheeks, and there will be other times when cheeks are turned against us. As we encounter these moments, we must ask ourselves: "Are we willing to see the humanity in those whom we offend, and in those who offend us? And if we are, are will willing to meet that humanity with the love of God?"

This morning, and every morning, we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." This will only be so if we follow another way, the one that Jesus taught -- the way of love.

May It always be so. Amen.