

“Anyone who inflicts a permanent injury on his or her neighbor shall receive the same in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The same injury that one gives another shall be inflicted in return” (Lv 24:19-20). Such is the Old Testament teaching from the book of Leviticus. The purpose was to “moderate vengeance; the punishment should not exceed the injury done” (Footnote to Mt 5:38). Thus, if one is guilty of murder, the appropriate response is the death of one who has taken a like. Jesus forbids this proportionate retribution. “I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on [your] right cheek, turn the other one to him as well” (Mt 5:39).

Bishop Barron explains what this means very well. “‘If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn and give him the other.’ No one in Jesus’ time would have used the unclean left hand for any kind of social interaction. Therefore, to strike someone on the right cheek was to hit him with the back of the hand, and this was a gesture of contempt, reserved for slaves and social inferiors. Faced with this kind of aggression, Jesus says, one should neither fight back nor flee; rather one should stand one’s ground and turn the other cheek. He thereby signals to the aggressor that he refuses to live in that person’s spiritual and psychological space. And he mirrors back the aggressor’s aggression, shaming him into self-awareness and prompting conversion.”ⁱ

Saint Paul sheds further light on how disciples of Jesus are to live this out. “We commend ourselves as ministers of God, through much endurance, in afflictions, hardships, constraints, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, vigils, fasts” (2 Cor 6:4-5). The appropriate way to counter violence is with non-violence. One does not retaliate but one does need to turn to God for help. The vigils and fasting he suggests are a penitential way of gaining the strength to remain nonviolent in the midst of a storm of harmful behavior.

One can also counter ignorance with knowledge, patience, kindness, and love. Some years ago, a man was beating on the doors of a church. He did not seem to be the sort of person one could reason with. Yet, a saintly woman who had a great understanding of human nature called him out for his actions. She disarmed him with a smile and invited him to calm down and behave. The man was used to violent responses to his outbursts. He was not use to a non-violent approach. He responded quite gently to this very humane approach.

On another occasion, the police were called upon to help with a woman pounding on the door and demanding to be let in. Her violent behavior was not conducive to opening the door to a stranger. The policeman was very patient, but the woman still resisted and did not want to budge. After a 20-minute standoff, the pastor happened to come by the scene and cautiously approached the woman so as not to scare her or the policeman. He spoke softly to the woman and offered a prayer. With God’s grace she calmed down and then cooperated with the policeman trying to help her.

The ultimate guide for a non-violent response is Jesus. He could have called down a legion of angels to prevent his scourging and crucifixion. Instead, he chose to submit to the will of the Father and accepted the scandal of the cross. Jesus suffered greatly and offered all of this up to the Father for the forgiveness of our sins. Each time we make the sign of the cross, we should call to mind the love God has for us and ask for the strength and wisdom to turn the other cheek.

ⁱ assumptiondc.org/2020/02/turn-the-other-cheek/