

“The science of turning the other cheek”
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I want to share with you a true story I heard on the podcast *Invisibilia*.

It’s a summer night in Washington, DC. Eight friends have come together for a dinner party in a backyard. Michael Rabdau is one of the guests, and he’s there with his wife and 14-year-old daughter. They’re all laughing and having a good time, until everything suddenly goes quiet.

The first thing Michael remembers is the gun. A man raises a gun to the head of Michael’s friend, Christina, and then to the head of Michael’s wife. He shouts, “Give me your money, or I’m going to start shooting!”

Terrified but not having any cash, they fumble for words. Everything they say just seems to make the man angrier. Then one of the women at the table says, “You know, we’re celebrating. Why don’t you have a glass of wine?” “All of a sudden, Michael says, the look on the man’s face change[s].” He takes a glass of wine. He drinks it slowly and says, “That’s a really good glass of wine.” Next he reaches for some cheese and puts the gun in his pocket. He looks at them and says, “I think I’ve come to the wrong place.” They’re all just sitting there, and it’s quiet. You can hear the crickets. And he says, “Can I get a hug?”

Michael’s wife—who had just had a gun pressed against her head—gives him a hug. Then another person gives him a hug. And then the whole group hugs him. He says, “I’m sorry,” and walks away, still holding the glass of wine. They run into the house, and they cry. Tears of shock, of fear, of gratitude, of complete bafflement as to what just happened. Later, they find the glass gently placed on the sidewalk. And all Michael can say is “It was like a miracle.”

I’m inclined to agree with him. This kind of thing just doesn’t happen in real life, right? Unless... it’s a miracle.

I admit that’s how I often feel about this teaching of Jesus we just read. It’s a noble idea: love your enemies, turn the other cheek. And, by some kind of miracle, Jesus pulls it off. Even from the cross, he asks God to forgive the people who did this to him. But for those of us who aren’t the Son of God, turning the other cheek just isn’t practical, is it?

What Jesus describes *is* unnatural. According to psychologists, we naturally mirror each other’s emotions. In other words, if you’re hostile to me, I’m going to be hostile to you.

I find it incredibly hard not to get defensive or to hit back when I feel attacked. Maybe you do too. And for awhile, it feels good to hurt the person who's hurt us. It feels just and fair. But when we all we do is mirror each other's hostility, we end up with just a whole lot of hurting, lonely people. Gandhi once said that "an eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind."

It gets me thinking, I'd like a miracle too.

But there's a professor at Michigan State University, Chris Hopwood, who says that what happened at that dinner party wasn't a miracle; it's a principle of psychology. It's called non-complementary behavior. We know it as turning the other cheek.

It turns out that this idealistic, seemingly naive teaching of Jesus is scientifically proven to alter human behavior and change the emotions in a room.

Someone's hostile to you, and you respond with warmth, with kindness. It doesn't always work. But when it does, it acts like an emergency brake on a runaway train. The hostile party is so surprised to see you not mirroring them that they begin to mirror you and your kindness.

Invisibilia co-host Alex Spiegel says, "The march in Selma, nonviolence in India, offering a man with a gun at your head a glass of wine—those aren't miracles. They're examples of non-complementary behavior." That's what she calls it. I'd say they're examples of the gospel.

You may already know that these teachings of Jesus aren't about being a pushover. They're actually strategies to reveal and resist injustice, lovingly and nonviolently, such that your humanity and the humanity of your enemy are commonly elevated.

While the NRSV has Jesus saying, "Do not resist an evildoer," Walter Wink and other scholars tell us that a better translation of the word *antistenai* (which is most commonly used in contexts of warfare) would read, "Do not violently resist an evildoer."

To be slapped on your right cheek was to be back-handed—a form of humiliation and dominance reserved for people who didn't just count in Roman society: slaves, women, children, the poor. Jesus isn't saying submit to abuse; he's saying lift your head up and show your other cheek. Force your attacker to recognize your—and their—humanity.

To turn the other cheek is to insist your attacker treat you as an equal. To give up your cloak is to shame your oppressor with your nakedness. To go a second mile is to cause trouble for a Roman soldier who, by law, can only force you to carry his possessions for one mile.

But even more than that, Jesus says, these are ways to be like God, to meet hate with love.

Jesus knows that it's not easy to love those who hurt and humiliate us. So, he tells us to pray. And in the chapter after this one, he teaches us to pray using these words: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

Believe it or not, it's a strategy that can work even on as tough an issue as terrorism.

Several years ago, countries all over Europe began to face a crisis that continues to this day—thousands of their own people were being radicalized and becoming terrorists. And one small coastal city in Denmark—Aarhus (ar-hoos)—was right in the middle of it all. Dozens of young men were disappearing and going off to Syria to fight what they believed to be a holy war, leaving behind frantic parents and an increasingly combustible community ready to turn against its entire Muslim population.

Most European nations quickly mirrored the hostility of these terrorists. They met force with force. They took away people's passports; they prosecuted and incarcerated. France shut down dozens of mosques. British Prime Minister David Cameron declared, "You are an enemy of the UK, and you should expect to be treated as such."

But in Aarhus, the police weren't sure what to do. They couldn't arrest them just for going to Syria; that wasn't illegal. And they couldn't really prove what they had done while over there.

So, two cops came up with an idea, and it would prove to be one of the most unique approaches to the war on terror.

The way they saw it, they had two choices. They could let these young men go back to the life they knew, only to get angrier and more radicalized, or they could offer to help them. They chose to help.

They invited them to their office and offered them coffee. They talked and listened. They helped them get jobs, health care, apartments, and education. They gave them mentors. And when they found out that a lot of these guys were just mirroring the anti-Muslim hostility they had experienced while growing up (one guy described getting pulled over by police nine times in a single day just because he was Arab), they owned up. They said they were sorry.

And it worked, for the most part. Every young man who had left to go to Syria answered their call and joined the program. Hundreds of other young guys who were thinking about going went too. Since 2012, they have reached 330 people. Almost none of them have gone to Syria since this program started. A few have, however.

Sometimes no matter what you do, you can't change someone. All of Jesus' love wasn't enough to stop his enemies from crucifying him. Maybe you've had similar people in your life. And in those cases, we pray that, at the end of all things, *God* will be there to change them.

But until then, we know: we can't change everyone. We also know that this just doesn't work in some situations. In contexts of abuse, turning the other cheek has to mean something else, or it just ends up keeping us trapped in cycles of violence.

Our love can't change everyone. But it does change us. Every time. When we open ourselves to loving others, especially our enemies, not by submitting but by insisting on their humanity and our humanity, we change.

The police officers in Denmark changed. The people at that dinner party changed.

And sometimes our enemies change. And we find a wine glass placed neatly on a sidewalk. Or we find ourselves laughing and sharing stories over a cup of coffee with a person we once thought of as a terrorist.

Loving your enemy won't stop a bullet. But it may—just may—stop the trigger from ever being pulled. That's the science, and the gospel, of turning the other cheek. **Amen.**