

“Turn the other cheek”: The Psychological Mechanism of Winning Without Aggression

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Mt. 5:39:

“But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

Almost everyone has heard this instruction. In childhood, when you grow up in a Christian family, it sounds somewhat puzzling: how can you allow someone to offend you in kindergarten or school? In adolescence, when most of us experience a transitional period and suffer from youthful maximalism (and some — for life), despair often comes, followed by protest against the “adult world.”

This article is not theological in the traditional sense. My goal is to bring the biblical principle closer to sociological and psychological understanding. As someone who has gone through maximalism and radical moods myself, I can say: despite doubts, the Bible remains an extremely relevant book. It contains many texts that can teach an individual to see deeper. Christianity truly became one of the foundations of modern society.

Psychological strategy of calm

Many respected sociologists and psychologists note: the strategy of calm often “breaks” the psychological offensive of an opponent, leaving them defenseless.

American psychologist **Marshall Bertram Rosenberg** developed the concept of **Nonviolent Communication (NVC)** in the early 1960s. Its goal is a shift from judgments and accusations to a clear description of facts, sincere expression of feelings, and formulation of specific requests. This is not a manipulative technique but an ethical approach aimed at establishing contact and mutual understanding. Rosenberg emphasized that correct communication can de-escalate a conflict.



Marshall B. Rosenberg gives a lecture at NVC (1990). Photo: Wikipedia

Four components of NVC

1. Observation

Core: name the specific action or fact without evaluation or interpretation.

Why it's important: evaluations ("you are mean," "you always do this") trigger a defensive reaction, whereas neutral facts do not.

Example:

Bad: "You are humiliating me again!"

Good: "When you said in front of colleagues today, 'You don't understand this'..."

2. Feeling

Core: genuinely name the emotion the situation caused.

Important: avoid the formula “I feel that...” — it is often an interpretation rather than an emotion.

Example: “From your words I feel humiliated/ashamed/angry.”

3. Need

Core: identify the underlying need behind the emotion (respect, safety, understanding, autonomy).

Why: needs are universal and neutral, so they provoke less resistance.

Example: “Respect and mutual support in the team are important to me.”

4. Request

Core: formulate a concrete positive action you ask the other person to do.

Important: a request ≠ a demand. It should be worded so the other person keeps the freedom to respond.

Example: “Could you next time explain your opinion without the phrase ‘you don’t understand this’ or tell it to me privately?”

Body language, tone and rhythm — how to enhance the effect

- **Tone of voice:** even, calm; shouting or a sharp tone provokes a mirrored resistance.
- **Posture:** open, without crossed arms; a defensive position signals tension.
- **Eye contact:** soft but confident; avoiding gaze or aggressive staring provokes.
- **Speech tempo:** slightly slower than usual — a signal of control and stability.

A real case: the Martin Luther King Jr. movement

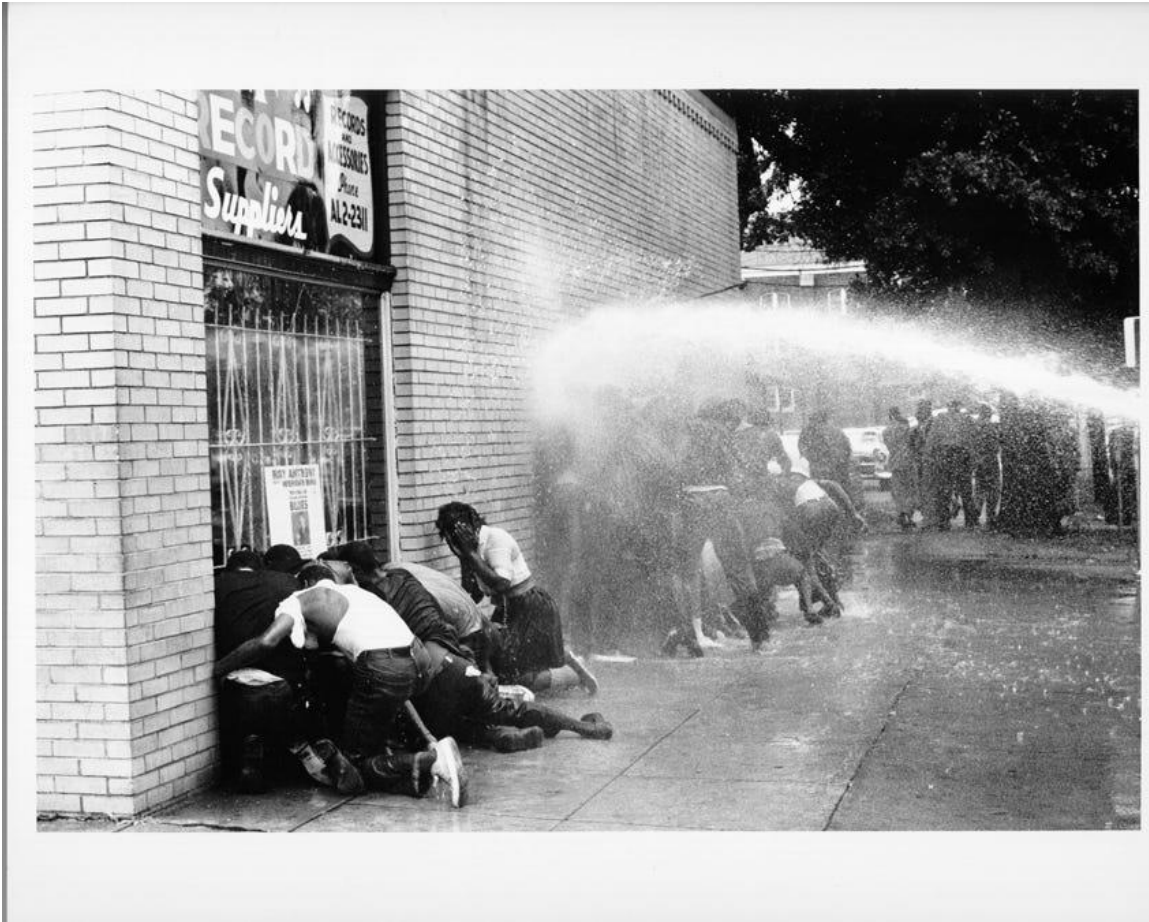
In the 1960s in the United States there were numerous peaceful marches for the rights of African Americans led by Baptist pastor and civic leader [Martin Luther King Jr.](#)

On the day before actions, participants gathered in churches and halls where they were taught nonviolence discipline: how to sit during arrest, how to keep calm in the face of insults and even blows. They were emphasized that not responding with aggression is a conscious choice and a strategy.

On the day of the march, thousands of people took to the streets with posters. They sang spiritual hymns, prayed, held placards demanding equal rights. At the same time,

demonstrators strictly observed discipline: no insults toward opponents, no physical actions in response.

The authorities reacted harshly: batons, police dogs, fire hoses, tear gas, mass arrests. Cameras were filled with protesters. But people kept calm. If someone was beaten — they got up and walked on. If someone was thrown into prison — others sang and continued the action.



People were attacked by dogs and water cannons during a protest against segregation organized by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth in May 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama. Photo: nbcdfw.com

Television footage showed a striking contrast: peaceful people, including children, against armed police with dogs. For Americans who saw this on screens, the scenes looked cruel and unfair. Public opinion began to change, pressure on the government increased.

Ultimately this strategy produced results: the federal government passed laws that changed the position of African Americans. Nonviolent discipline proved not to be a weakness but strength. It forced the aggressor to reveal their nature in the eyes of society, while protesters remained a symbol of moral resilience.

Conclusion

The material considered shows that the evangelical instruction “turn the other cheek” can have a perfectly practical psychological and sociological explanation. It is not about passive acceptance of an insult, but about a conscious choice of a strategy of calm that can destroy the opponent’s aggression. Marshall Rosenberg’s Nonviolent Communication concept provides a clear toolkit — from observation without judgment to formulating a request — that allows a person to express their feelings and needs without eliciting a defensive reaction in the other.

Martin Luther King Jr.’s civil protest practice demonstrates that even in large-scale social conflicts, a refusal of aggression can turn into a source of moral power that mobilizes society and changes political structures.

Sources

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