

## **A Plot Twist for Angst: The Sermon on the Mount as Resistance to Anger Culture**

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### **Abstract**

*Media technology and social platforms have created a cultural condition of contention, where the performance of angst against one's polarized ideological perspective is regarded as a virtue. Drawing upon the principle of "turn[ing] the other cheek" in the Sermon on the Mount, I make the case for a necessary and practical application to counter the performance of angst and instead allow some concessions to pursue greater harmony with ideological foes. This useful application of the Sermon's practicality functions as a plot twist in lives and societies, thereby promoting goodwill in an age of difference. This twist was initially established and promoted in Jesus's biblical teachings that advocated an ethic of generous passivity on some elements of disagreement, along with the call for prudent reservation on issues that are less provocative and weighty. This prescription from Jesus establishes a shared understanding for a more humane future, illustrated through a case study of the life of Maximillian Kolbe.*

**Keywords:** Sermon on the Mount, Social Media, Anger Culture, Plot Twist, Biblical Application

## Introduction

A recent study on plot twists in cultural narratives describes how subversive storytelling can challenge, disrupt, and redirect the trajectory of groups of people.<sup>1</sup> This is the expressive and effectual power of resistant narratives and social movements. Real-life plot twists occur when groups of people create drastically different and confrontational narratives that compete with established narratives.<sup>2</sup> In our current age of anger, frustration, and growing commitment to upending traditional perspectives that have shaped influential thought processes as well as increasing engagement with alternative narrative histories,<sup>3</sup> a new political authority is emerging that prioritizes angst activism over traditional beliefs and assumptions.<sup>4</sup> It could be said, then, that we are thereby entering—as societies—into an age of anger.

This process of plot twists is prominent in history,<sup>5</sup> including the virtuous narratives in the *Bible* that shaped the collective understanding of Judeo-Christian history and beliefs.<sup>6</sup> They often operate as unexpected odds being accomplished due to God's engagement with irony through ironic interventions in moments of adversity. These ironic plot twists in the *Bible* include the unexpected and miraculous situations that had

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<sup>1</sup> Beigi, Mina, Callahan, Jamie, and Michaelson, Christopher. "A Critical Plot Twist: Changing Characters and Foreshadowing the Future of Organizational Storytelling." *International Journal of Management Reviews* 21(4), 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Hotchman, Yael, and Spector-Mersel, Gabriela. "Three Strategies for Doing Narrative Resistance: Navigating Between Master and Narratives." *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 59(4), 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Miller, Maureen C. "The Crisis in the Investiture Crisis Narrative." *History Compass*, 7(6).

<sup>4</sup> Wohl, Michael J. A., King, Michael, and Taylor, Donald M. "Expressions of Political Practice: Collective Angst Moderates Politicized Collective Identity to Predict Support for Political Protest (Peaceful or Violent) Among Diaspora Group Members." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 43, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Alden, Garrett. "Top 10 Real Life Plot Twists that Changed History Forever." *Watch Mojo*, 2025.

<sup>6</sup> Biblical references are used from the King James Bible Online.

dramatic effects on their time, and which reverberate today in biblical study. These cases are extensive in the Old Testament, including David defeating Goliath in battle (1 Samuel 17), Esther defeating her conniving enemy Haman (Esther 7), Joseph revealing himself as the deliverer who his brothers feared (Genesis 45), Solomon's threat to divide a child to differentiate the true mother from the imposter (1 Kings 3), Hezekiah's healing while the sun seemingly moved backward (2 Kings 20). Similar moments appear in the life and ministry of Jesus: his conversation with the woman at the well where he slowly reveals his identity to her after seeming to initially be just a man simply asking for water (John 4), Jesus's escape from Herod's murder of newborns who threatened his power (Matthew 2), the irony of his being misinterpreted as Joseph's son when he would later be worshipped as the divine son (John 6), Mary's miraculous pregnancy (Luke 1), and the prophesied description that Jesus would lack charismatic physical attraction as part of his influential power (Isaiah 53:2).

Jesus's ministry and expansive effect on the changing landscape of human history are impossible to quantify—impacting both Jewish law as well as the ongoing effect of his teachings two thousand years later. The time of his ministry was marked with changes in the “fulfillment” (Matthew 5:17) and transcendence past the Law of Moses,<sup>7</sup> the irony of his crucifixion mockery, which foreshadowed his contemporary influence in the Christian world as the kingly figure that was mocked in his torturous hours,<sup>8</sup> and the eventual recognition of him as the most influential person in world history.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Branscomb, Harvie. “Jesus' Attitude to the Law of Moses.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 47(1/2), 1928.

<sup>8</sup> Marcus, Joel. “Crucifixion as Parodic Exaltation.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125(1), 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Houldin, Leslie, editor. *Jesus in History, Thought, and Culture: An Encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003.

I make the case that the Sermon on the Mount is a plot twist in human history—and one that needs to re-emerge as a response to an age of anger. Mark Ward<sup>10</sup> made a similar case about the twist—the shocking change of lifestyle expectations—that Jesus asked of his audience in the Sermon. Considering the weight of plot twists in human storytelling, the ongoing plot changes in the contemporary ‘suffering race’<sup>11</sup>—expressed through the performance of angst—that are explored in this study, along with the historical influence of Jesus as the disruptor of plots amid his prevailing influence today, an examination and application of his teachings as a corrective measure for an age of anger are both timely and necessary.

### **An Age of Anger and the Need for a Plot Twist**

Coretta Scott King famously said “Revenge and retaliation always perpetuate the cycle of anger, fear, and violence.”<sup>12</sup> The key to this quote is “cycle.” Cycles come back. They are repetitive. They grow in intensity. So, Mrs. Scott was instructing us to end the cycle of the need to retaliate. Yet, today the social landscape of angst culture demonstrates the emotional and polarizing fires that she carefully chose in her descriptive words to warn against: “anger, fear, retaliation, violence.” Today, decades later, her words read as a haunting forecast of our current society. We live in an age of anger, a time when political and ideological polarizations are growing,<sup>13</sup> largely due to the rhetorical forces in social media.<sup>14</sup> As a response to angst

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<sup>10</sup> Ward, Mark. “The Twist on the Sermon on the Mount That You Probably Missed.” *LogosTalk*, 23 August 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Noor, Masi, Shnabel, Nurit, Halabi, Samer, and Nadler, Ari. “When Suffering Begets Suffering: The Psychology of Competitive Victimhood Between Adversarial Groups in Violent Conflicts.” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 16(4), 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Hammon, Nicholas. “Revenge and Retaliation...” *British School of Paris*, 2025.

<sup>13</sup> Heltzel, Gordon, and Laurin, Kristin. “Polarization in America: Two Possible Futures.” *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 34, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Kubin, Emily, and von Sikorski, Christian. “The Role of (Social) Media in Political Polarization: A Systematic Review.” *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 45(3), 2021.

culture, this study is meant to advocate for the revival of the plot twist regarding interpersonal relations as described by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount—that plot twist of expectations amid the chief priests’ harsh application of Hebrew law that Jesus responded to with a prescription that altered the fabric of human history.<sup>15</sup>

A 2022 study described the growth of contention as a practice that gives us “meaning”<sup>16</sup>—or purpose in our lives. This could beg the question, is there a contemporary hormonal high from contention? Dr. Jean Kim<sup>17</sup> says we can become “addicted to anger” and get a dopamine hit from the emotional high of frequent feelings of anger. If modern culture now finds stimulation in conflict, then ancient wisdom offers a necessary contrast. Are we, then, not just indulging anger—but actively pursuing it? Determination to exact revenge on injustices is prevalent today. Harvard sociologist Terry Aladjem calls this our “Culture of Vengeance”<sup>18</sup> that is prevalent in America—describing it as “a reactive, public anger” that has been brewing.

Considering this cultural state we’ve entered, we need answers to this new age of anger. This study considers the applicability of Jesus’s message to “agree with thine adversary” as an echoed (Matthew 5:25), age-old response in a culture of vengeance<sup>19</sup> that is growing in a mediated age. I argue that Jesus’s plea in the Sermon on the Mount calls for an ethics rooted in careful discernment—one that encourages strategic, measured responses to complex ideological differences. This methodical delicacy is crucial in an intensifying age of anger—an age

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<sup>15</sup> Ward.

<sup>16</sup> Göttsche-Astrup, Johan. “A Sociological Perspective on the Experience of Contention.” *Sociological Theory*, 40(3), 224.

<sup>17</sup> Kim, Jean. “Anger’s Allure: Are You Addicted to Anger? Reasons Why Anger Can Be a Hard Habit to Break,” *Psychology Today*, 25 August 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Aladjem, Terry. *The Culture of Anger and the Fate of American Justice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, abstract.

<sup>19</sup> Aladjem.

disturbingly reflective of the political climate Jesus himself navigated in ancient Israel.

## **Cultural Shifts from Disagreement to Contention**

I treat the concept of contention as the dismissal of others—quickly and sweepingly, and without consideration of where their attempt at logic is coming from. As it seeks to dismiss and silence opposition, performative contention is a move for influence.<sup>20</sup> Contemporary contention can be understood as being heightened by two processes. The first is the effect of controversial presidential elections<sup>21</sup> and other politically polarizing topics—issues where people claim corruption and as a result have deeply seeded beliefs that their political and ideological opponents are corrupt.<sup>22</sup> Second, the culture of contention was then heightened by a pandemic that drove people into isolation,<sup>23</sup> deeper vestment into social media, and heightened sensitivity to being affected by disagreement.<sup>24</sup>

This culture of vengeance more readily comes from the ability for people to congregate, or meet as groups, online—such as Facebook groups and the dark web’s promise of groups being

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<sup>20</sup> Martin, Ryan C. and Vieaux, Lauren E. "9. The Digital Rage: How Anger is Expressed Online." *The Psychology of Social Networking Vol.2: Identity and Relationships in Online Communities*, Warsaw, Poland: De Gruyter Open Poland, 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Keating, V.C., and Schmitt, O. "Ideology and Influence in the Debate over Russian Election Interference." *Int Polit* 58, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Alper, Sinan, & Imhoff, Roland. "Suspecting Foul Play When It Is Objectively There: The Association of Political Orientation with General and Partisan Conspiracy Beliefs as a Function of Corruption Levels." *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 14(5), 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Sakurai, Ryota, Sakurai, Masanari, Suzuki, Hiroyuki, and Fujiwara, Yoshinori. "Preference for Solitude Paradox: The Psychological Influence of Social Isolation Despite Preference." *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 365, 2024.

<sup>24</sup> Zhan, Hongli, Sosea, Tiberiu, Caragea, Cornelia, and Li, Junyi Jessy. "Why Do You Feel This Way? Summarizing Triggers of Emotions in Social Media Posts." *Computation and Language*, 2022.

untraceable.<sup>25</sup> This age of collaborative and organized displays of anger is identified by Pankaj Mishra,<sup>26</sup> who makes the case that disdain and extremism go hand in hand. Anger culture is also manifest in a newly awakened euphoria of protests. We have entered a fine line between protesting and rioting.<sup>27</sup> Contention is also alive in its insistence on a collective honoring of new and evolving social identities, whatever they may be.<sup>28</sup> These are hallmarks of a twenty-first century lifestyle marked by unprecedented comfort—where physical safety is rarely a concern, and reputation has become the battleground. And, in the age of social media, we will fight for the survival of our reputations.<sup>29</sup>

The challenge is, however, that these contentious displays are growing.<sup>30</sup> In their book *Angrynomics*,<sup>31</sup> Eric Lonergan and Mark Blyth call this the “public anger” that comes from “the energy of tribes.” In recent years we’ve watched recorded footage of young black men being murdered by those who have claimed their actions were the pursuit of justice—namely the murders of Ahmad Arbery and George Floyd.<sup>32</sup> Further, in 2024 the protests on campuses moved past being protests and became

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<sup>25</sup> Kaur, Shubhdeep, and Randhawa, Suckhchandani. “Dark Web: A Web of Crimes.” *Wireless Pers Commun* 112(2131–2158), 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Pankaj, Mishra. *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Farrar, Max. “Rioting or Protesting? Losing It or Finding It?” *Parallax*, 18(2), 2012, 72–91.

<sup>28</sup> Polletta, F. “Politics, Social Movements, and The State.” *Contemporary Sociology* 31(5), 2002.

<sup>29</sup> Yergensen, Brent. “The Futurologist’s Priestly Voice: Rhetorics of Technology and the Pursuit of Immortality.” *Mortality*, 2025.

<sup>30</sup> Metzger, Megan MacDuffee. “Social Media and Protest: The Changing Dynamics of Contention in the Digital Age.” *ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global*, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Lonergan, E., and Blyth, M. *Angrynomics*. Newcastle: Agenda Publishing, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Knowles, Hannah, Nakamura, David, and Coker, Margaret. “Racist Slurs, Violent Messages: How Arbery’s Killers Talked About Black People.” *Washington Post*, 16 February 2022.

riots that looked remarkably similar to the January 6, 2021 Capitol riot.<sup>33</sup>

This rising crescendo of contention appears to be moving toward revenge revolutions.<sup>34</sup> We might interpret this as a symptom of a loss of applicable Christian wisdom—a growing hostility that drives how we perceive and engage with others. Recalling, realizing, and acting with intellectual answers is part of the solution. These cultural shifts toward increasing contention call for a response grounded in historic wisdom—particularly in the Sermon on the Mount delivered by Jesus, which offers a profound plot twist in the trajectory of human ethics and social relations.

### **Displays of Disdain and the Market for Anger**

Protesting has become a market to tap into. The company Crowds on Demand<sup>35</sup> works with organizations to perform protests for publicity. In early 2024 Crowds on Demand put out a call for twenty seven-foot, 300-pound actors to make a remarkable public impact. The CEO wrote in the call to hire these men of gigantic stature, “Your presence at events will be pivotal in adding an undeniable intimidation factor, bringing a ‘giant to the gate’ of organizations accused of wrongdoing, and helping to ensure our protests are taken seriously and can achieve their intended impact.”<sup>36</sup>

We could correctly label this as intimidation of enemies for hire. While not directly connected to Crowds on Demand, similar tactics appear to be in use, with protestors—possibly paid or

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<sup>33</sup> Nazzaro, Miranda. “Al Sharpton Draws Comparison Between Jan. 6 Riot and College Protests.” *The Hill*, 2 May 2024.

<sup>34</sup> Aylward, Mary Kate, Engelke, Peter, Friedman, Uri, and Kielstra, Paul. “Welcome to 2035: What the World Could Look Like in Ten Years, According to More than 350 Experts.” *Atlantic Council*, 2025.

<sup>35</sup> Crowds on Demand, 2025.

<sup>36</sup> Goldberg, Noah. “Paid Protester Company Looking to Hire 7-Foot, 300-Pound ‘Giants’ for Intimidation Factor,” *Los Angeles Times*, 14 March 2024.

coordinated—reported to be ransacking state and private educational buildings.<sup>37</sup> Some geopolitical analysts warn of escalating global tensions, with authoritarian leaders consolidating power beyond traditional term limits—raising concerns reminiscent of pre-war dynamics.<sup>38</sup> Further, there is a continuous worry in the air about nuclear warfare breaking out.<sup>39</sup> These converging threats underscore the urgent need for restraint—not just on a geopolitical level, but within the interpersonal ethics that shape our society.

To understand this differentiation from the past, which informs our current trajectory, in the history of American thought there was a shared appreciation for diverse perspectives.<sup>40</sup> The ability to disagree was a gift. Differences were expressed not as points of contention, but as part of a dialectical pursuit of truth.<sup>41</sup> Debate was unifying because it was stimulating. Expression of differences enriched conversation. Differing opinions bonded people in friendship and bantered rivalry—not personal and not ill-intended. This means there was a celebration of debate and an intellectual power to be found in the goal of objectivity—or the ability to see things without bias. People from diverse perspectives came together with a shared desire to discern the most accurate, ethical, and beneficial course of action. Yet today, this culture of engagement has devolved into an age of vengeance—where hostility replaces inquiry, and ethical discourse is drowned out by performative outrage. This shift away from rational discourse mirrors the very kind of moral unraveling that Jesus sought to arrest in the Sermon on the

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<sup>37</sup> Bowman, Emma. “NYC Says Half of Those Arrested at 2 Pro-Palestinian Campus Protests Were Not Students,” *NPR*, 4 May 2024.

<sup>38</sup> Guriev, Sergei, and Treisman, Daniel. *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Hrubec, Marek. “Threat of Limited Nuclear War.” *Critical Sociology*, 45(6), 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Johnson, David W., and Johnson, Roger T. “Civil Political Discourse in a Democracy: The Contribution of Psychology,” *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 6(4), 2000.

<sup>41</sup> Toulmin, Stephen. *The Uses of Argument*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Mount—a call not to domination, but to radical understanding and restraint.

### **Diagnosing an Age of Anger**

Key to the challenge under discussion is how digital media has changed lifestyles. While contemporary lifestyles are more comfortable than at any other age,<sup>42</sup> we are ironically more brazen and intolerant, able to dismiss the need for personal decorum while shielded behind screens through social media messaging that can be discrete or at least lacks interpersonal ethics.<sup>43</sup> Group euphoria is increasingly tied to niche communities that derive identity through the vilification of perceived enemies.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, the digital world is the new guerrilla warfare of our day<sup>45</sup>—or the ability to fire shots at enemies without being seen. The intermingling of social unrest—our impulse to anger and the ability to use the online world for persuasion—is driving new senses of justice, new forms of declaring victimage, and new forms of vilifying enemies.

Researchers are observing, asking important questions, and examining the growth of anger, which is in many instances more a need for revenge. The Center for Countering Digital Hate<sup>46</sup> identifies the interworkings of hate being displayed and distributed in the digital world. Similarly, the Alan Turing Institute<sup>47</sup> does an effective job of providing a hub reference for these efforts to identify and combat hate, similar to The Online Hate Index which is run by the Anti-Defamation League at the University of California at Berkeley's Center for Technology and

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<sup>42</sup> Yergensen.

<sup>43</sup> Metzger.

<sup>44</sup> Beisel, David. "Looking for Enemies, 1990-1994." *The Journal of Psychohistory*, 22(1), 1994.

<sup>45</sup> Svetoka, Sandra. *Social Media as a Tool of Hybrid Warfare*. Riga Kalnciema: NATO Strategic Communications, 2016.

<sup>46</sup> Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2025.

<sup>47</sup> The Alan Turing Institute. "Online Hate Research Hub," 2025.

Society,<sup>48</sup> and the GATE Hate tagger at the University of Sheffield.<sup>49</sup> As research continues to diagnose the rise of anger and victimage—and as digital life encourages the formation of online echo chambers—polarization deepens amid growing fears of global catastrophe. In such a context, ancient answers found in the teachings of Jesus merit renewed attention as potential correctives to our cultural trajectory. This climate of digital rage and ideological fragmentation demands more than reactive policies—it calls for ethical reorientation. Amid these research efforts, one thing becomes clear: diagnosis alone is insufficient. The Sermon on the Mount offers such a reorientation. Below I highlight a treatment for application of the teachings of Jesus from his Sermon on the Mount that provides justification for the recollection and use of his call to understand others, pick battles, and seek union when disunion is popular and even commodified.

### **Jesus's Charge as a Plot Twist, Then and Now**

Plot twists can occur on a larger and more consequential scale than their usual associate with creative writing suggests, such as government officials and corporate leaders having things exposed—for good and bad—to the public.<sup>50</sup> Revolutionary thinkers bring to light what we have taken for granted and show us what should to be. The primary incident of an unexpected call to change in perspective is from Jesus's rupture of prevailing Judaic thought, which emphasized justice over mercy and power over altruism.<sup>51</sup> To appreciate the radical nature of this ethical vision, it's essential to understand the social order Jesus confronted.

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<sup>48</sup> Center for Technology & Society. "Online Hate Index Innovation Brief," 2018.

<sup>49</sup> Gate Cloud. "Gate Hate," 2025.

<sup>50</sup> Terluenen, Milan. "All Along...! The Pre-history of the Plot Twist in Nineteenth-Century Fiction." *ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global*, 2022.

<sup>51</sup> Baxter, Wayne. "The Narrative Setting of the Sermon on the Mount." *Trinity Journal*, 25(1), 2004.

A decade ago *The Atlantic* surveyed influential thinkers, asking them the question, ‘What is the greatest speech ever given?’<sup>52</sup> The answers varied. But, for *US News and World Report* editor Robert Schlesinger, it was a simple answer: the Sermon on the Mount. His reasoning is “the breadth of the effect it's had through history.”<sup>53</sup> Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount is regarded as an approach to an ethical lifestyle. President Franklin D. Roosevelt described the value of the Sermon as the solution to social ills, saying “I doubt if there is any problem in the world today -- social, political, or economic -- that would not find happy solution if approached in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount.”<sup>54</sup> Further, Schlesinger admitted, as a proclaimed agnostic, that “For sheer reach and influence, it's hard to argue against Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.”

The Sermon on the Mount goes right to the point of concern about enemies. Despite his influence both then and especially now in the Christian world, Jesus directly challenged the social and political dominance of the chief priests—figures often seen as his opponents, who, according to some scholars, maintained control over the Judean population through economic and social dominance—reflected in their elaborate wardrobes and indulgent lifestyles. Sakari Hakkinen<sup>55</sup> calls these leaders at the time of Jesus’s ministry the “privileged elite,” and describes their “lavish lifestyle” that was a “ruling class” made up of the “priest, scribes, and bureaucrats” who lived in “palaces... fortifications” and had “a forceful army.” How did they obtain this wealth? The answer is striking: “Members of the imperial ruling class enjoyed a comfortable and privileged standard of living without engaging in any productive labour on behalf of

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<sup>52</sup> Stein, Ben. “What Was the Greatest Speech, Historical or Fiction, Ever Given?” *The Atlantic*, October 2013.

<sup>53</sup> Schlesinger, Robert. “Great Seech Ever?” *US News & World Report*, 20 September 2013.

<sup>54</sup> Roosevelt, Franklin D. “Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States.” *F.D. Roosevelt, 1938, Volume 7*, 1941, 541.

<sup>55</sup> Häkkinen, Sakari. “Poverty in the First-Century Galilee,” *HTS Theological Studies*, 72(4), 2016.

society and with no obligation to those they ruled... other than to assure that they were able to produce sufficient wealth to sustain the rulers in their privilege.” Most shocking, “It has been estimated that at least half of the annual production went to the urban elite.” This power over the Judean population was abusive. They exercised social control, projected intimidation, and publicly performed their wealth.

Yet Jesus, a rebel to their lifestyle, tapped into the proverbial gutter of their society and engaged those with broken lives and delivered a penetrating ethical charge to act out of mercy in our interactions with others rather than the need to perform with a persona of wealth. By doing this, Jesus disrupted political power and social hierarchies<sup>56</sup>—a challenge both then and now, particularly in our age of anger. This charge would require deep psychological reflection, willingness to live in less comfort, and lifelong commitment to disassociate the self from the desperation for performing within high-class public associations. Thus, the Sermon on the Mount is a dismissal of our human impulses. It comes with a request to do so for the sake of improving our communities.

### **The Sermon on the Mount as Applied Ethic**

The call to sacrifice is a formidable demand—especially when it includes accepting public humiliation, an idea that runs counter to the performance-driven ethos of social media. We are often desperate to protect our own reputations. But to be okay being humiliated? It is easy to misunderstand Jesus’s plea to “agree with thine adversary” (Matthew 5:25) as a call to passively surrender, rather than an invitation to strategically de-escalate conflict. Similarly, his directive to “turn the other

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<sup>56</sup> Crossley, James, and Myles, Robert J. *Jesus: A Life in Class Conflict*, 2023. United Kingdom: ZerO Books.

cheek” (Matthew 5:39) could be seen as weakness rather than an act of moral strength or subversive restraint.<sup>57</sup>

Considering application to the contemporary challenges faced today in an age of anger, these expectations are more comparable to a wise person saying, “pick your battles,” “do we really have to fight about this?” or, “can they just have their way on this one?” The answer to these questions in an influencer, mediated world, might be “no.” The impulse to fight hypersensitivity stems in part from the concept of “microaggressions,”<sup>58</sup>—small offenses that, while subtle, provide strong emotional reactions and public performance of discomfort. Applying the Sermon’s message to “agree with thine adversary” (Matthew 5:25)—or pick your battles—is hard to do when researchers are demonstrating that a new “moral culture”<sup>59</sup> of microaggression policing is taking shape.

The growth of “victim culture”<sup>60</sup> when understood as in opposition to the Sermon’s call for prudent restraint on some matters, exhibits the fixation on microaggressions. If we can illustrate this “turn[ing] of the cheek” (Matthew 5:39) through understanding and prudent application of the altruistic call from Jesus, unexpected generosity toward would-be enemies can provoke subtle but transformative realizations—what might be called ‘micro-epiphanies’—in those entrenched in the performative cycles of digital victimhood.

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<sup>57</sup> Legant, Patricia, and Mettee, David R. “Turning the Other Cheek Versus Getting Even: Vengeance, Equity, and Attraction.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 25(2), 1973.

<sup>58</sup> Sue, Derald Wing, editor. *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Press, 2010.

<sup>59</sup> Campbell, Bradley, and Manning, Jason. *The Rise of Victim Culture: Microaggressions, Safe Spaces, and the New Culture Wars*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

<sup>60</sup> Campbell and Manning.

## **“Turn[ing] the Other Cheek” and Maximillian Kolbe**

The story of the World War II-era Catholic Priest Maximillian Kolbe<sup>61</sup> is a key illustration of the application of Jesus’s teachings amid the depths of disdain and hate posturing. The Nazi regime was intolerant, hunting those they disagreed with and hated, and fixated on control. They exhibited the inability to see the life histories of individuals and the complex value of cultures that were not their own.<sup>62</sup> In today’s terms, Nazi government was centered on policing microaggressions with its moves to dictate opinions and speech of German citizens by controlling dialogue with a readiness to pounce on resistance under the legality established with the Reichstage Fire Decree, the Malicious Practices Act, and the Treachery Act.<sup>63</sup> In some ways, Nazi control mirrored the authoritative and murderous nature of the chief priests.

Kolbe was imprisoned by the Nazis at Auschwitz camp after refusing to sign a contract that he was of an ethnicity that should be saved, meaning not Jewish. Because of his resistance to Nazi elite-planning, Kolbe was imprisoned rather than rewarded for compliance to Nazi ideology. Imprisoned, Kolbe was surrounded by a group of Jewish men who, one day, received word that some of them would be chosen to enter the starvation camp. When one man who was chosen began to weep as he knew he would never see his family again, Kolbe volunteered to take his place, and the Nazis agreed to torture the volunteering priest. Over the next several weeks the men slowly died. Kolbe did his best to keep their spirits up by leading them in prayer and singing. As the last man left and having not died of starvation, Kolbe then agreed to die by lethal injection by holding his arm out to be injected with poison and exhibiting the powerful call for ‘agreeing with his adversary.’

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<sup>61</sup> Saint Maximilian Kolbe Church, 2025.

<sup>62</sup> Hammond, Ross A., and Robert Axelrod, Robert. “The Evolution of Ethnocentrism.” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 50(6), 2006.

<sup>63</sup> Bradsher, Greg. “The Nuremberg Laws.” *Prologue Magazine* 42(4), 2010.

Kolbe had the opportunity to save himself by signing a waiver declaring that he was elite. Instead, he chose to endure torture in place of those condemned by “turn[ing] the other cheek also” (Matthew 5:39). The Sermon on the Mount remains disruptive in times of violence, disdain, and when contention is cycling. Jesus’s charge and Kolbe’s application challenge our cultural tendency to catalog grievances, whether minor or—like in Kolbe’s case—life threatening. Nonetheless, the transference of Kolbe’s example of understanding the point of Jesus’s Sermon offers an ironic twist on the dangers of authoritarian control, whether from a modern regime like Nazism or from the religious elites of Jesus’s time.

### **Jesus’s Charge to “Reconcile” and Exhibit Sincerity**

Before vengeance culture can become what is warned against by researchers and exhibited in the history of Kolbe’s application of Jesus’s teachings, a further application from the Sermon on the Mount includes the deliberate leadership quality of decisive reconciliation with adversaries. In the Sermon Jesus emphasizes the importance of reconciling with when there is contention. The first responsibility that he gives us is to “First be reconciled to thy brother” (Matthew 5:24). Here, “thy brother” could mean familial relationships as well as strained social groups that are pinned against each other by discourses that are driven by the culture of vengeance. The call to reconcile demands a deliberate abandonment of disdain, rivalry, and the unresolved tensions so often stoked by the microaggression culture on social media.

As Jesus declares the necessity of sincerity and goodwill in our interactions, generosity replaces the appeal for a culture of defensiveness. In essence, Jesus seems to disdain the appeal to entertain ongoing spite toward others when differences are genuinely resolvable, even with enemies. “Reconcile” (Matthew 5:24) matters at an individual level. Important for consideration

of the age of angst explored here, reconciliation matters as a cultural level—places like social media where communities of people collaborate and are drawn into a protected form of digital guerrilla warfare, where attacks are easy to launch and cost little to the attacker.

Jesus further expounds upon goodwill when foes are in need. When someone is hungry, he charges his audience to give them a fish—the common source of protein at the time of Jesus’s ministry—instead of a serpent (Matthew 7:9-11). This lesson is supplemented by the outreach of giving bread instead of a rock (Matthew 7:9). These metaphors of food in the treatment of others speaks to a type of care for all others to survive at a time when survival was more brutal than it is for us.<sup>64</sup> As the opportunity to eat in past ages was more treasured than it is now, the push to give food to foes was a strong push for altruism.

Jesus’s condemnation of insincerity climaxes in his metaphor: those who sincerely plot against others are “wolves in sheep’s clothing” (Matthew 7:15). Baiting the innocent and unaware is a damaging pattern of behavior for the individual and the group. Instead, Jesus’s call is answered through a transparent and straightforward ethic that rejects calculated secrecy and sinister intent. Hence, the guerrilla warfare of social media warfare and microaggression itemization operate in direct opposition to the ancient wisdom of Jesus that has reverberated across two millennia.

### **The Sermon as Social Cure**

The Sermon on the Mount is an ancient answer for contemporary social unrest. It describes a radical change in how we approach human relationships, political strife, and the way we display ourselves. In an age of performing pain on social media—publicly showcasing victimhood for cultural capital—

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<sup>64</sup> Rops, Henri. *Daily Life in Palestine at the Time of Christ*. London: Phoenix Press, 2002.

and microaggression hunting, the plot twist from history's most celebrated teacher is the ultimate hint from the Sermon: disengage from public disdain. Jesus's charge is a foundation for dealing with the perplexing issues of contemporary social life. This timeless wisdom is especially urgent today.

Given the well-documented rise in cultural anger, and Jesus's repeated use of transformative plot twists, the Sermon on the Mount offers a necessary correction to our modern trajectory. Like in ages past, the Sermon on the Mount can align us with human-centered, altruistic communication. A personal ethic on letting others have their victories, of refusing to respond with an insult, of putting the humanity of others first disrupts the gravitation toward microaggression counting. The lessons from the Sermon on the Mount and contemporary siloing of identity camps cannot be reconciled.

The authoritarian self-righteousness of the chief priests, who chose to be enemies to Jesus, lived their lives as performance (Matthew 26:65). That fixation on one's own reputation meant being okay with framing their enemy as dangerous and ordering his death. The chief priests' social performance parallels our age of anger when we fixate on microaggressions against us. In Jesus's final parable, the parable of the wicked husbandmen (Matthew 21:33-46), he identified their intention to kill him. The biblical account describes their intention to kill Jesus immediately had it not been for an audience who was watching his exchange with them. Their fixation on their reputation meant an over-sensitivity to Jesus—a tendency toward microaggressions that threatened their power.

While Jesus condemned performative social posturing, he simultaneously argued for a life of sacrifice. The life of calling out microaggressions is the opposite of "turning the other cheek also" (Matthew 5:39). Jesus never asked us to nitpick the perspectives of others. Instead, he asked us to pick our battles by choosing generosity toward differences that—upon

inspection in given situations—can be recognized as trivial distractions from a deeper call to extend grace to others.

### **Conclusion: The Sermon on the Mount as the Ethical Standard for Today**

I conclude by going back to the first lesson of the Sermon: the charge to be “the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13). Salt seasons but also preserves—two processes that enrich the human experience. Jesus then asks what is salt good for if it loses that preserving and seasoning purpose. Flavorless salt is the equivalent of a rock on the ground—essentially useless. As salt is a treasure that gives and preserves, those who reach beyond themselves and willingly sacrifice, willingly give—at a personal level and with enemies—are the demonstration of that salt in an age of anger.

There is an ethical imperative to shift our cultural trajectory through personal responsibility. People, individuals, can alter the trajectory of an age of anger. People follow examples that inspire them. What if we were to start to see more “turn[ing] the other cheek also” (Matthew 5:39) and “agreeing” with those who are different in perspective on the small things? An improved and self-reflective intellect should move the dial away from the angered mindset.

Ultimately, the response to an angered culture, with its dangerous trajectory, is a striking and demanding utilization of the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon ends with Jesus drawing the difference in wisdom—will we sink, or will we stand? Jesus’s final topic in the Sermon is the two houses built: one on sand one on rock (Matthew 7:24-27). Engaging in the constant need to be right, along with the constant need to be a victim—whatever it may be—is the end of wisdom. The house built upon the rock is having the wisdom to pick our battles or being willing to “agree with thine adversary” (Matthew 5:25) from time to time.

I started this study with an overview of biblical twists that changed the circumstances for people in need. The Sermon on the Mount was just that—an age of brutality was met with a message on forgiveness and often of the need for passivity. Generosity in difference allows dialogue. Generosity puts relationships first. With that, occasional passivity in the heat of the moment does not mean full-fledged pacifism,<sup>65</sup> or the refusal to engage in discussing differences at all. Thus, the intellectual plot twist proposed by Jesus is meant to be embodied today. In an age increasingly defined by vengeance, the urgency to apply Sermon’s plot twist of grace—self-restraint, forgiveness, and relational generosity—is growing.

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