

Six Principles of Non-Violence

<https://fee.org/articles/martin-luther-king-jr-s-6-principles-of-non-violence/>

Thinkers like Henry David Thoreau, who ascribed to the tradition of peaceful civil disobedience, also influenced King's thinking. But it wasn't until he embarked on his year-long journey of the [Montgomery bus boycott](#) that he began to assimilate all of these influences into his principles of non-violence. He laid these principles out in his 1958 book *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, and what follows is a short [summary](#) of each.

1. Non-Violence Is Not for the Faint of Heart

Practicing non-violence takes strength and resolve. It is not a pathway for those who seek to avoid conflict, as there is nothing passive about it. Rather this is an active stance, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. Those who practice are always looking for ways to persuade their opponents and looking for methods to effect change. They are in community, building bridges of influence to those in power, and seeking to build support for their cause.

2. Non-Violence Seeks to Defeat Injustice, Not People

Is it not true that those who commit evil are also victims of its power? King knew that the true battle for justice lies between good and evil, darkness and light. He saw those who would oppress him as also being victims of systemic injustice. Seeing one's enemies in this light helps us to view them sympathetically and focus on the root cause of the problem. King again echoed the Bible when he said that our struggle is ultimately not against particular people but systems – “the principalities and powers.”

3. The Goal of Non-Violence is Reconciliation

A wise man knows that you do not change a person by mocking or humiliating them. On this topic, King wrote, “Nonviolence does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent but to win friendship and understanding... The nonviolent resister must often express his protest through noncooperation or boycotts, but he realizes that these are not ends themselves; they are merely means to awaken a sense of moral shame in the opponent. ... The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness.”

4. Redemptive Suffering Holds Transformational Power

Perhaps the most important principle under the theory of non-violence is the power of undeserved suffering. The nonviolent resister is willing to accept violence if necessary, but not to inflict it, knowing that the suffering they endure has great power to change hearts and minds.

King paraphrased Gandhi when he wrote: “We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. We will not hate you, but we cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws. Do to us what you will and we will still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children; send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities and drag us out on some wayside road, beating us and leaving us half dead, and we will still love you. But we will soon wear you down by our capacity to suffer. And in winning our freedom we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process.”

5. Non-Violence Pertains to Physical Acts and Internal Thoughts

The nonviolent resister refuses to physically harm his opponent, but they also refuse to hate them. At the base of a nonviolent philosophy is the principle of love. For King, love (specifically the "[agape](#)" kind of love discussed by Plato) is proof of the power of God working within us, enabling us to care for those who would seek to harm us. Nonviolent love is in a way a weapon, it disarms your opponent and shields you from becoming them.

6. The Universe Is on the Side of Justice

King was an eternal optimist. And to do this work consistently, optimism is an essential outlook. "The believer in nonviolence has deep faith in the future," King wrote. "He knows that in his struggle for justice he has cosmic companionship. There is a creative force in this universe that works to bring the disconnected aspects of reality into a harmonious whole."