

“Love Your enemies or Forget them?”

In today’s scripture we hear perhaps Christ’s most challenging teachings: love your enemies. Turn the other cheek. Give them the shirt off your back. Most of us find it hard to love even our friends all the time, how are we expected to love our enemies? And for many, Christ’s examples of how to do this sound more like masochism than morality. If someone hits us, why would we let them hit us again? That sounds like passivity, and a way to encourage thieves and oppressors to just keep doing more of the same. Women and other oppressed groups have often been told to just sit there and take it; the moral high road belongs to those who don’t resist. Yet, throughout the New Testament, Christ encourages people to resist, and to help those who are oppressed. So why does Jesus here suggest we make beatings last longer? How can that help make the world a better place?

To understand what Jesus meant, we need to understand what life was like in the first century. What I’m about to explain I owe to the work of theologian Walter Wink.<sup>1</sup> Back in Christ’s time, people hit each other. To admonish, to insult, to hurt. There were different kinds of hitting. So that society didn’t descend into chaos, there were rules about this. If you wanted to hit someone of equal status, you could use your fists. But you had to expect they would respond with their fists, so both of you could get hurt. So, this was dangerous and risky.

As a result, most of the hitting that happened was between someone who had power, and someone who had none. Masters could hit slaves. Husbands could hit wives. Parents could hit children.<sup>2</sup> But there were rules for that, too. First: you could only use your right hand to hit someone. The left hand was used for wiping one’s bottom, so it was considered unclean. So, to slap someone else, only the right hand could be used. Next, you could only use the back of your hand. If you used your fist, that would imply this person was your equal. So, if you wanted to insult or admonish someone of lesser status, you had to use the back of your hand.

Here things get tricky, and I need to show you what this would look like. Let’s say this mannequin is someone I am allowed to strike with the back of my right hand. The slap will naturally land on this person’s right cheek. But a right-handed slap with the back of the hand only works if you hit the right cheek. Now let’s remember what Christ said. He advises the person who is hit to turn their other cheek to face the person who hit them. (Turn the mannequin). Now this poses a problem for the aggressor. It’s easy to hit the left cheek with the left hand, but that’s not allowed since it is unclean. But if you try to hit with the back of the right hand, it doesn’t work. It’s too awkward. His slave, or wife, or child, is staring back at him, offering a cheek, but he can’t hit it. So, the aggressor is stuck.

Christ’s advice is a way of turning the tables on the aggressor. The person who turns the other cheek is taking control of the situation and making it difficult for the person who hit them. This is not revenge or hitting back. It is a form of passive resistance, one that allows the person who

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter Wink, *Jesus, and Non-Violence: A Third Way* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2003), p14ff.

<sup>2</sup> [https://faculty.biu.ac.il/~barilm/articles/to\\_check/bat.html](https://faculty.biu.ac.il/~barilm/articles/to_check/bat.html)

was hit to keep eye contact with the violent one. Christ is advising, keep your agency, stare your enemy in the face.<sup>3</sup> Make them see your humanity has not been erased through this insult.

The same logic applies with the advice about the coat. If someone takes your coat, and still needs to take more, give them your tunic. In the gospel of Matthew, this scene is repeated, but he makes it clear that the person who gives up their coat is in debt to the one who takes it (Matthew 5:40). This person is so poor that the only way they can pay their debts is to give their creditor the clothes off their back. But what if they demand even more from you? Christ suggests giving them your tunic, too. So, let's see what would happen if you did that. Let's take off the tunic.

See what happens? You end up naked. Back then, people only wore two pieces of clothing.<sup>4</sup> In Jewish society, when someone was naked, it was a source of shame. But not to the person without clothes. The shame attached to the person who made them naked.<sup>5</sup> So if a creditor demands even the clothes off your back, Christ says, give them to him. Make him see that he has gone too far by causing you to stand naked. Once again, Christ is advising that we stand up to our enemies, stand naked before them, our humanity plain for all to see. Keep your dignity, do not slink away, or seek revenge. Stand up and look them in the eye. Insist that they see your humanity.

But does this work? Will turning the other cheek or going naked force our enemies to stand down? In the modern age, resistance by individuals can bring on fierce resistance from the state. This week, the Canadian and Ontario provincial governments invoked emergency powers to oppose the truckers at the border and in Ottawa. Civil liberties groups have cried foul that this is government overreach and have promised to challenge the federal government in court.<sup>6</sup> The fear is always that once a government invokes emergency powers against perceived enemies that those powers will last long after the crisis ends. Or the government will claim that the crisis is ongoing to justify keeping those powers.

In Central and South America, this sort of situation led many nations to become military dictatorships in the 1960s and 70s. A fear of communism taking over the country often led the military to take over the government to restore order.<sup>7</sup> But in reality, those governments became the people's worst enemies. They stayed in power long after the initial threat had passed. Any resistance against the government, especially by the young, was met with torture, kidnappings, and murder. In countries like Argentina, people disappeared, abducted from their homes, their cars, and the streets, and then were never heard of again. Their mothers would gather in public squares, mourning the loss of their disappeared sons and daughters. These police states made any show of resistance potentially fatal. Turning the other cheek, looking the enemy in the eye through protest, became an invitation to disaster.

---

<sup>3</sup> Wink, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> <https://blog.adw.org/2017/03/sort-clothing-people-jesus-time-wear/>

<sup>5</sup> Wink, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremy Nuttall, Tonda MacCharles, "Civil liberties group files suit over use of Emergencies Act against convoy protests," *Toronto Star*, Feb. 17, 2022

<sup>7</sup> Communism was the pretext for the military coup in Brazil, Chile (Allende),

However, in time, these military regimes lost power. Often, it was because the people became sick of their terror and lies. In the 1970s<sup>8</sup> and after<sup>9</sup>, dictatorships gave way to democratic governments. But now these societies had a problem. What should they do about all the secret executions? Where were the bodies of those who had been kidnapped and killed? In countries like Brazil, thousands of people had been tortured and released as enemies of the government.<sup>10</sup> With democracy back in place, what should victims do to get justice? Should they get the new government to arrest the people who tortured dissidents? How do enemies look each other in the eye when peace comes?

The solution in most of these countries was to adopt a policy of amnesia. Governments decided to grant amnesty to everyone, including the murderers and torturers within the government. In many countries, amnesty laws were put in place by the military just before they lost power.<sup>11</sup> The archives were sealed so no one could know the truth about what had happened, or where the bodies were buried. Even democratic governments agreed to do this in the name of keeping the peace.<sup>12</sup> Over in Europe, When Spain's dictatorship ended in 1975, the country agreed to what was called the "pact of forgetting."<sup>13</sup> Everyone would turn away from the truth. Schools would not teach the truth about what had happened. The next generation went through high school with no idea about the suffering earlier generations had endured. With archives sealed, and amnesty laws in place, amnesia became the way to keep the peace.<sup>14</sup>

The reason this matters to us now is that this strategy of forgetting has arrived on our doorstep. During the pandemic, George Floyd's death in Minneapolis sparked Black Lives Matter protests all over the United States and the world. These were usually peaceful protests, where Blacks and their allies marched, staring the state in the eye, demanding justice. Those protests led to a renewed appreciation of how our state laws have been racist in the past, and in the present. Our own North Toronto Cluster of churches started a book group a year ago where we examined how governments, in the United States and here in Canada, sought to exploit and oppress Blacks. Our states use laws governing immigration, policing and property to hold Blacks back. States have played a major part in oppressing Black people. Our education was inspired by the witness of those peaceful Black Lives Matter protests.

But in the country where George Floyd was killed, there has been a backlash. Individual states are enacting amnesia laws, like the ones in South America and Spain. These laws are dedicated to denying that the state has ever enacted racist policies. In particular, the legislation targets the teaching of critical race theory. This is the theory that argues that racism is maintained and

---

<sup>8</sup> Brazil: 1979.

<sup>9</sup> Chile's authoritarian government stepped down in 1990. Naomi Roht-Arriaza and Margaret Popkin, "Truth as Justice Investigatory Commissions in Latin America," 20 *Law & Social Inquiry* 79 (1995), p.84.

<sup>10</sup> Jasmin Goes, "Between Truth and Amnesia: State Terrorism, Human Rights Violations and Transitional Justice in Brazil," *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, No. 94 (2013) April,88.

<sup>11</sup> Jasmin Goes, 84-5.

<sup>12</sup> The democratically elected President of Brazil declared that its archives would be sealed "eternally" in 2002. Jasmin Goes, 90-1.

<sup>13</sup> Giles Tremlett, "After Franco, the forgetting," *The Guardian*, Nov 3, 2007

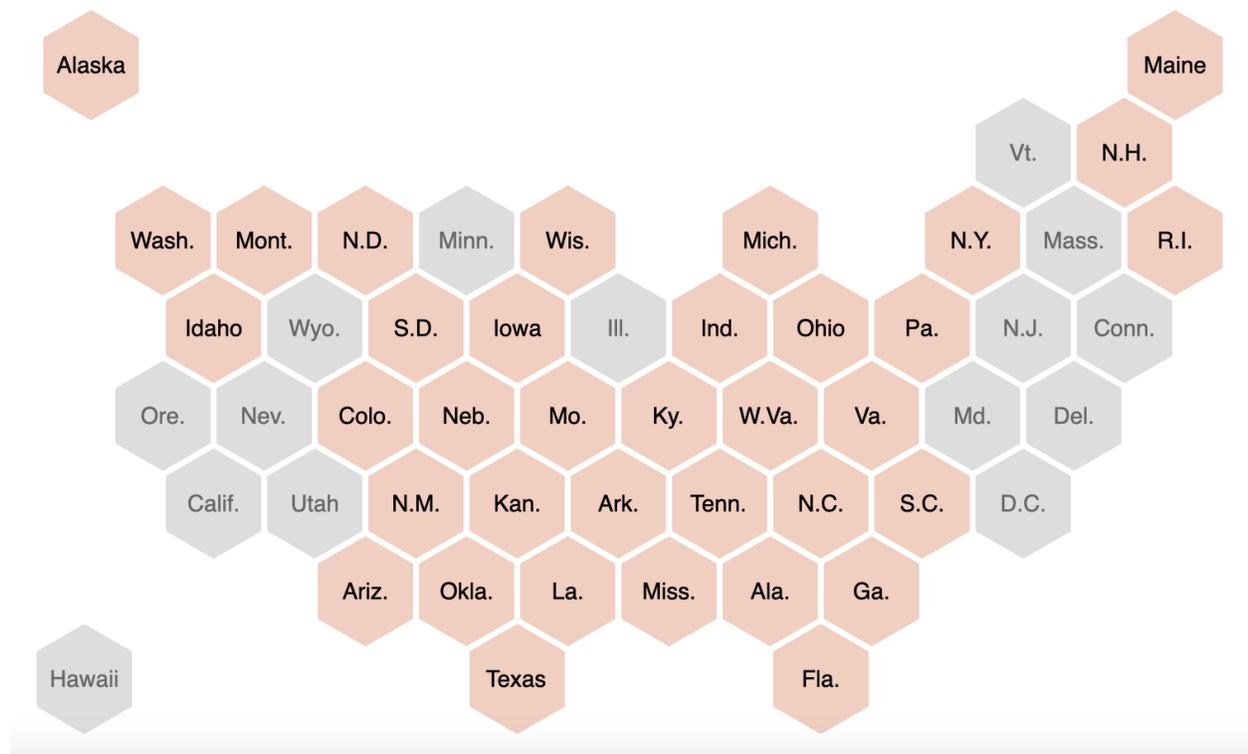
<sup>14</sup> Madeleine Davis, "Is Spain Recovering Its Memory? Breaking the "Pacto del Olvido" *Human Rights Quarterly*, Aug. 2005, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Aug. 2005),864.

perpetuated through state laws. Legislation that made slavery legal, that separated Blacks and whites in buses, in movie theatres and kept them in separate schools. That idea, that the state could act in a racist way, is now under attack.

Here's a map of all the states who are changing their laws to deny that governments have racist policies.

## We have tracked efforts in 36 states to **restrict** education on racism, bias, the contributions of specific racial or ethnic groups to U.S. history, or related topics

*Click or tap on a state to see details.*



It's most of them, 38 so far. Some already have passed these laws, others are in process. Note that they are not just states in the South: this legislation can be found throughout the Midwest and in New Hampshire and Pennsylvania in the northeast.

The bills sound a lot alike, with many of them using exactly the same wording in sections about discrimination. They prohibit the discussion of any issue that might make a person experience feelings of guilt or anguish based on their race.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Florida, Texas, Oklahoma, Mississippi

Here's the wording as it appears in the South Carolina bill. It is prohibited:  
"that any individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex."  
This wording appears in many of these bills.

1                   5. That members of one race or sex cannot and should  
2                   not attempt to treat others without respect to race or sex.  
3                   6. That an individual's moral character is  
4                   necessarily determined by his or her race or sex.  
5                   7. That an individual, by virtue of his or her race  
6                   or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past  
7                   by other members of the same race or sex.  
8                   8. That any individual should feel discomfort,  
9                   guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on  
10                  account of his or her race or sex.  
11                  9. That meritocracy or traits such as a hard work  
12                  ethic are racist or sexist, or were created by a particular  
13                  race to oppress another race.  
14                  b. This term includes any other form of race or sex  
15                  stereotyping or any other form of race or sex scapegoating.

The bills are written so that White children should not be put in the position of feeling bad about what white people in the past or present have done to oppress Black people. Most of the bills prohibit the teaching of the idea that slavery and racism have played a key part in the establishment of the United States and its economy. The bills explicitly reject the idea that the state has played a key role in maintaining and promoting racism. In Mississippi's bill, one clause rules out teaching any divisive concepts, including the idea that the United States or the state of Mississippi may be systemically racist.<sup>16</sup> In Georgia last year, Republican Gov. Brian Kemp called critical race theory "anti-American."<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> <http://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/documents/2022/html/HB/0400-0499/HB0437IN.htm>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.chalkbeat.org/22525983/map-critical-race-theory-legislation-teaching-racism> click on Georgia to find the quote.

This is Black History month, a tradition that was started in the United States in 1970.<sup>18</sup> Yet now, 50 years later, dozens of American states are making it impossible to teach Black History. White American politicians and their supporters are enacting their own amnesia laws, their own pacts of forgetting. Jesus told his followers to love their enemies, but to look them in the eye when they hurt you. Keep your dignity. Proclaim your humanity through non-violent resistance. But what should we do if the enemy won't look us in the eye? What we do with an enemy who has no sense of shame? Who, when faced with centuries of ugly truths about their own conduct, simply shuts down the conversation, and teaches their children that none of it happened? What do you do when the enemy closes their eyes, and keeps on hitting?

When Jesus advises that we love our enemies, he says we should pray and bless them. Not because they are doing good things, but because they are so lost. Jesus reminds us that God loves all people, including the ones who are ungrateful and ignore God. We are called to do better than just loving the people who love us. That's easy, everyone does that. Jesus tells us that we are called to go further, to love and pray for those who oppress others, even us. Not so they can keep oppressing. We pray for our enemies because they are blind to the beauty and humanity of those they mistreat. We are called to maintain our dignity, to keep looking them in the eye. Not only to maintain our integrity, but to serve as a witness of our humanity to those who would deny it. We are called to be allies, to stand with the oppressed, even when it is not our cheek that burns from the slap. Christ urges us to insist on the dignity of each human being, even including those who are the most deluded, the ones who come to us as enemies.

In South America and Spain, the amnesia laws did not last. In time, victims insisted that the truth be known. Other nations, acting as allies, dragged smug dictators into international courts to answer for their crimes.<sup>19</sup> The graves of the disappeared were located. Amnesty laws and the pacts of forgetting were overturned.<sup>20</sup> The African American theologian Cornell West has said, "justice is what love looks like in public." To love your enemy means praying for their return, to look you in the eye.

For the angry hand to drop, for the cloak and shirt to be handed back.

For hatred to turn into remorse.

For denial to turn into recognition and respect.

For love to inspire compassion in the one who was once an enemy.

Amen.

---

<sup>18</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black\\_History\\_Month#United\\_States:\\_Black\\_History\\_Month\\_\(1970\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_History_Month#United_States:_Black_History_Month_(1970))

<sup>19</sup> Spain prosecuted dictators from Chile and Argentina before its own regime was held to account: Madeleine Davis, "Is Spain Recovering Its Memory? Breaking the 'Pacto del Olvido'" *Human Rights Quarterly*, Aug. 2005, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Aug. 2005), 868.

<sup>20</sup> Spain decided to remember officially in 2007, graves located: Giles Tremlett, "After Franco, the forgetting," *The Guardian*, Nov 3, 2007. Brazil opted for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2011, opened its archives in 2011: Iasmin Goes, "Between Truth and Amnesia: State Terrorism, Human Rights Violations and Transitional Justice in Brazil," *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, No. 94 (2013) April, 84;92.

Argentina repealed amnesty in late 1990s. Naomi Roht-Arriaza, "Truth Commissions and Amnesties in Latin America: The Second Generation," *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting (American Society of International Law)*, APRIL 1-4, 1998, Vol. 92, *The Challenge of Non-State Actors* (APRIL 1-4, 1998), 313.

