

“Does Christianity liberate or oppress?”
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Luke 6:27-38

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The year was 2015. It was a different and more innocent time—when the thing dividing our nation wasn’t vaccines or masks, school boards or riots, but a dress. Immediately, some of you already know what I’m talking about—and I can tell, you are ready to fight. This dress became so famous that its Wikipedia article is simply titled, “The dress.” Within a week of its posting, people had already Tweeted about it more than 10 million times. The debate was whether the dress was black and blue or white and gold. People went nuts. Households were divided, marriages ended, friendships destroyed. Eventually, it was confirmed that the dress was indeed black and blue (by the way, I was right; Jenna was wrong—I just want to put that in the record). Scientists have suggested all kinds of theories, but still we wonder...

How is it possible that millions of people looked at the same image and saw totally different colors?

We could ask the same question about any number of things—including what we’re doing right now, coming to church, being Christians. To some, Christianity is a healing expression of love and truth. To others, it’s a hurtful and judgmental superstition. Somehow, the same religion has managed to launch Crusades, endorse genocide, accumulate ridiculous wealth, while also leading civil rights, standing in solidarity with the poor, and advocating peace. It has both defended *and* opposed slavery, suppressed *and* advanced science, prophesied revolution *and* endorsed the status quo.

One person looks at Christianity and sees something beautiful; another sees something very ugly. How do we explain this dichotomous history and experience of Christianity?

In some ways, this duality isn’t shocking. Whenever people are involved with anything, both good and bad things happen, because people are both good and bad.

But here’s the real question: What if the problem isn’t just the people? What if the problem is with the ideals themselves? Is it just that Christianity has sometimes gone astray, become captive to corrupt or ignorant people, or is there something wrong with our faith, something that predisposes it to hurting people?

Nowhere is that debate clearer than in this text from Luke. This famous passage of Jesus’ sermon and its talk of enemy-love is perhaps one of the most complicated and troublesome passages of all the Gospels. It tells us to answer hate with love, to care about those who hurt us, to offer our other cheek to those who hit the first, to give more of our possessions to those who steal from us, to be kind even when someone is cruel and ungrateful.

Are these good ideals, or bad?

I mean, think about it. We're not just talking about refraining from anger at the barista who gets your coffee wrong, or the jerk who cuts you off on the highway. We're talking about loving the members of ISIS. We're talking about loving the person who shoots up a school or a church. And if we lived back in Jesus' day, we'd be talking about loving the Roman soldier who killed your brother and desecrated your temple, whose empire has reduced you to poverty.

Surely, Christianity must be held accountable to how these words have been used: the pastor who encouraged the victim to suffer abuse as an act of love; the enslaver who taught submission as piety.

Is Jesus really telling us just to let people walk all over us?

Yet, others have found in this passage a radical philosophy of nonviolent resistance to injustice, a means by which vulnerable people stand up for themselves, assert their dignity and equality, identify and shame abuse, and transform the ones who perpetuate such evil. They have found, in this passage, a way to be free—of hate, of anger, as well as free of the control of the one hurting them.

So which is it? Is the dress black and blue, or white and gold?

I think I know—just as I thought I knew the colors of the dress (and just in case you forgot: I was right; Jenna was wrong. Someone really should write that down. It happens so rarely.). I see a Jesus who wants people to be loved, not hurt. This is a savior who empowers people, fills them with the Holy Spirit, calls them to be disciples; he doesn't render them passive or silent. He condemns violence. This is the man who inserts his body between a woman and the men who would throw stones at her. This is the man who drives out the money lenders from the temple and stops them from exploiting the poor. This is the man who says he's come to bring freedom to the oppressed.

I think what Jesus is saying here is that the only way to be free is to love. If you hate your enemy, if you devote your energy to resenting them, your mind is captive to them.

Love is the only way to break the cycle of violence, shame, and injustice—for you, and for them.

This is not a submissive love. This is a defiant, earth-shattering, "Hear Me Roar" love.

The Greek word for love, here, is *agape*, the same word used to describe God's essence. It's not liking someone, or obeying them. This is God-love, a love so big, so strong, so independent that it seeks the wellbeing of the other without needing anything from them, because you are already complete and entire unto yourself. You are a mountain.

That is the last thing anyone expects when they hurt you. They figure you'll either take it or try to hurt them back. Either way, the cycle continues. More violence. More degradation.

Jesus proposes a third way, which neither retaliates nor submits, but transcends.

He says turn the other cheek. Force your attacker to use their other hand, which in Jesus' culture elevates you as an equal (no longer a slave who's being backhanded on the right cheek) and shames your attacker. To turn the other cheek is to make your attacker see your humanity, your dignity, your strength, and witness the loss of their own.

Bishop Desmond TuTu once shared a story about walking along a sidewalk in South Africa during Apartheid. A white man coming the other direction shouted at him, "Get off the sidewalk. I don't make way for gorillas." The Bishop stepped off the sidewalk and replied, "I do!"

Likewise, when Jesus talks about theft of a coat, he's talking about people so poor that all they have is the shirt on their back, and someone's trying to take even that. He says: give them every piece of cloth on your body, stand naked in the court of law, and show their greed for the world to see.

This is a love that retakes power while refusing to return the wrong. It insists that you deserve better—and they are capable of better. It demands that they see your humanity—and gives them a chance to get theirs back.

It's the only way the cycle stops.

I believe that with all my heart. And yet, I still don't know if that's enough. Was love going to stop Hitler? It didn't stop them from killing Jesus. Sure, because of his love, he remained free and true to the end. But is that enough? Can I really in good conscience counsel this to the oppressed? Can I ask Black and Brown people to forgive, love, and march nonviolently, while centuries of death and inequality soldier on, and systems of white supremacy, often couched in Christianity, still have not learned to love? Is that what Jesus had in mind?

I don't want to defend the church to people who are hurting; I want to repent, listen, and love them. I want to stand with them. And that's when I remember who Jesus was. He wasn't the one counseling the oppressed; he *was* the oppressed. A poor, brown-skinned Jew living under the tyranny of an empire, betrayed and hurt by *his* own church. A savior who purposefully identified with the abused, the hungry, the excluded, the shamed.

This isn't an invitation for people in positions of privilege and safety to tell victims how they should respond to their oppression. After all, Jesus concludes his teaching today with a reminder not to judge others, including in how they respond to their oppression. This is an invitation to let divine love so transform *you* that you can see beyond judgment, beyond categories of friend and enemy, and see the world through someone else's eyes, see humanity where others see only monstrosity.

This teaching of enemy-love is only liberating when it emerges from the voice of the oppressed themselves, as it does for Jesus, as a strategy to live free and with dignity, to love fully in the image of God, to confront injustice without becoming unjust themselves, to transform society and restore the humanity of their oppressors.

I don't get to tell the victim of domestic violence, or racism, or poverty, or any other crime or injustice, what to do. That's not the liberating love Jesus describes; that's just more domination, more of someone forcing their will on them. If I am to be remade in the image of God, which is Love, then I will not coerce or lecture or presume; I will listen; I will care; I will honor; I will attempt to see through their eyes; I will forgive; I will give them whatever I have, in whatever terms they ask of me.

And when I fail to do so, because I am a sinner, or when I too am a victim, I will hope that they will do the same for me. Forgive me. Listen to me. Love me. No matter what.

That's how Christianity breaks the cycle. **Amen.**