



4. Persecution is guaranteed.

“For many today, religious liberty is not a cherished freedom. It’s often just an excuse for bigotry and it can’t be tolerated even when there’s no evidence that anybody has been harmed. “The question we face is whether our society will be inclusive enough to tolerate people with unpopular religious beliefs.”

Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito said this just this past Thursday. And he was talking about the United States, not a Muslim country on the other side of the world.

The last two Sundays I showed you the 2020 World Watch List listing the top twenty nations where persecution is either severe or extremely high. Remember that persecution is the opposite of religious liberty. These same countries would be at the bottom of a list of countries who support religious liberty. Here are the top ten countries with the most religious freedom.¹

1. NETHERLANDS
2. CANADA
3. NORWAY
4. AUSTRALIA
5. UNITED STATES
6. UNITED KINGDOM
7. BELGIUM
8. DENMARK
9. NEW ZEALAND
10. SWEDEN

Personally, I’m not sure if Norway should be on this list. Just this past week they passed a law that would “punish people with up to a year in jail for private remarks, and up to three years for public remarks.”^{2 3} But in general it seems fair that these are roughly the best countries for religious liberty. Now we need to discern the reasons for the differences between the top ten

nations and the bottom twenty nations. The most obvious difference is that fact that the top ten nations have historically been Christian nations and the bottom twenty are non-Christian nations. But if you take one step further back, you'd have to say that the reason Christianity has flourished in these countries is because their governments protected religious liberty and the reverse is true with the bottom twenty countries.

Let me repeat the goal I have set for these two messages. We need to know how to defend religious liberty while also accepting persecution for the sake of Jesus Christ. Therefore, it is inevitable that good government is part of the solution for defending religious liberty. As I said last week, we need a just government to fight and protect our religious liberties, but we don't need it to express our religious liberties. God, not Caesar, has ordained our right to worship him. However, even though good government is not the ultimate solution for the right to worship, it is part of the solution. And we have been most fortunate to live in this nation. You get that, right? You don't live here because of a roll of the dice. We aren't "lucky" to live where we do. Each of us have been placed here by the sovereign grace of God. We were the first nation to place a clear statement of religious liberty in our founding documents. And for over two hundred years that right has been largely defended.

One of those defenses came through the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993, which reads as follows. "The framers of the Constitution, recognizing free exercise of religion as an unalienable right, secured its protection in the First Amendment to the Constitution; governments should not substantially burden religious exercise without compelling justification"⁴ This was important legislation because it was a bill that strongly supported our first amendment rights of religious liberty. Interestingly, the main sponsor of the bill was Chuck Schumer. More amazing still is the fact that it received bi-partisan support and was passed in the senate by a 97-3 vote. In 2014, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the Religious Freedom Restoration Act protected Hobby Lobby from being forced to provide abortion-inducing drugs.⁵ So this is good news. But we also need to understand how far our nation has shifted since 1993.

The Religious Freedom Restoration Act is a great piece of legislation. However, in 2019 the House passed the Equality Act⁶ which was sponsored by 237 Democrats and three Republicans. The bill adds gender and sexual orientation to the 1964 Civil Rights Act which will declare that gender and sexual orientation are the exact same thing as skin color. The ramifications of this bill are frightening. Here are several quotes from Bible scholars and Constitutional experts.

- "The bill represents the most invasive threat to religious liberty ever proposed in America. Given that it touches areas of education, public accommodation, employment, and federal funding, were it to pass, its sweeping effects on religious liberty, free speech, and freedom of conscience would be both historic and also chilling."⁷
- "It is the most dangerous bill to freedom of speech and the free exercise of religion that has ever been proposed on a national level. It will codify into law that you are a bigot, the moral equivalent of a racist, tantamount to being a member of the Klu Klux Klan, who must be shut out of society and, wherever possible, harassed and persecuted for your beliefs."⁸

- “These policies are not being used to promote equality. Instead, they are being used as a blunt-force weapon to ban disagreement on marriage and sexuality by punishing dissenters.”⁹
- By amending the definition of 'sex' in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, this legislation codifies a fundamental right to an abortion up until the moment of birth" -- one minute short of infanticide. By effectively eliminating Hyde protections, it ensures that American taxpayers foot the bill for abortions.¹⁰
- This is “the largest expansion of taxpayer-funded abortion this country has ever seen.”¹¹
- As an example, “In Massachusetts, state officials declared that churches are subject to state public accommodation laws. That meant if churches host public activities – something as simple as a spaghetti supper – they would be forced to open women’s private changing areas and restrooms to biological men. If a church refused, it would face crippling fines and even jail time.”

That all sounds horrible, but we might reason that since the Religious Freedom Act protected Hobby Lobby just a few years ago, won’t it also protect Christians and churches against the Equality Act? Here is the official wording of the Equality Act on this point. “The Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 shall not provide a claim concerning, or a defense to a claim under, a covered title, or provide a basis for challenging the application or enforcement of a covered title.” This is blatant religious discrimination. As many have said, this should be called the Inequality Act.

This bill is just waiting to be passed by the Senate and the president. Whenever the topic of persecution of Christians, I usually say something like, “Well we know that persecution is coming, we just don’t know when it will come.” I am quite confident that if the Equality Act is ever passed it will become the catalyst that ignites massive persecution against Christians and churches. I share all of this not so that we can despair, but so that we can be aware.

The Bible guarantees that persecution will come. We have been insulated from the worst of it because of the government protection of our religious liberties, which of course have been ordained by God. Let me remind you of these guarantees.

“Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.” (John 15:20).

“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3.12).

¹⁶“Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. ¹⁷Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, ¹⁸and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. ¹⁹When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. ²⁰For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. ²¹Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, ²²and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved” (Matthew 10:16-22).

5. Persecution separates the wheat from the chaff.

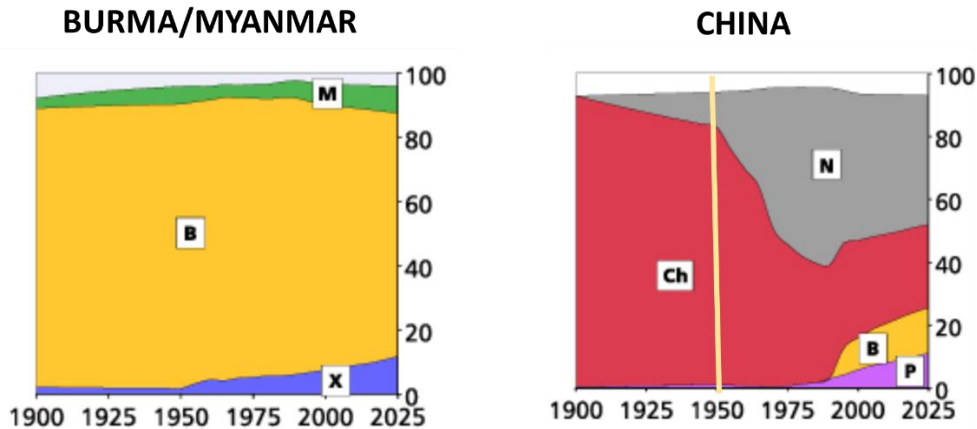
Persecution is guaranteed for the growing believer, but there is a near foolproof way to avoid persecution for your faith. We see the solution in the parable of the sower. “As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy,²¹ yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away” (Matthew 13:20).

Persecution has the effect of causing false believers to fall away. Jesus knew this which is why he said, “I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God” (John 16:2). Not if, but when persecution comes it will cause some to fall away. Which is why the parable of the weeds follows immediately after the parable of the sower.

²⁴ He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field,²⁵ but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away.²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also.²⁷ And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?’²⁸ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ So the servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’²⁹ But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them.³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, “Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.”’”

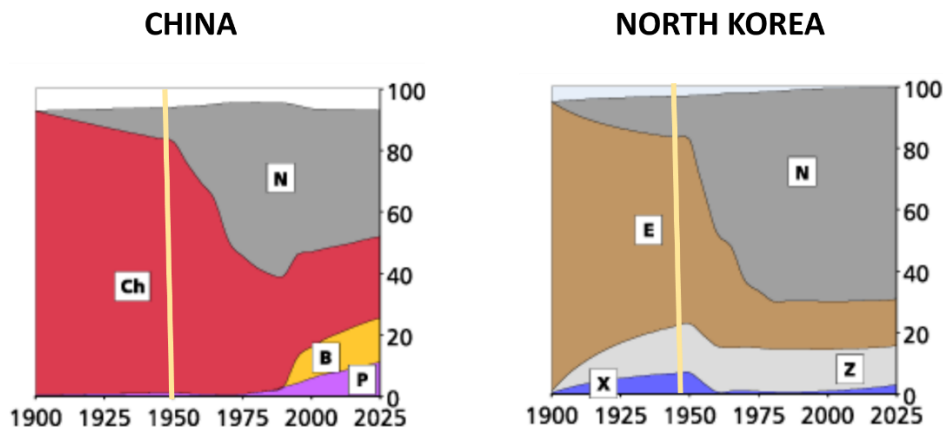
It’s possible that some sitting here this morning would fall away under persecution. It’s OK to be concerned about this possibility. It’s possible that some have no root and will wither. It’s possible that some will shrink back when times get tough. Freedom of worship has the unintentional effect of separating the wheat from the chaff. That’s just a fact. I think we all understand that believers living under persecution are, pound for pound, more mature than the average believer living in a state of freedom. I want to show you what this looks like around the world.

These diagrams are all from the website of Operation World. I’ll start with Burma and China.



There are a lot of colors on these diagrams representing various religions. To make it easier, Christianity always appears on the bottom, regardless of the color—in this case, Burmese believers are in blue and Chinese believers are purple. Burma has had consistently poor religious freedom, yet there has been a slow growth of believers for the past 150 years. On the other hand, China's serious persecution began when Communism took over in 1950. Despite their differences, both countries have a population of approximately 15% Christians. But of course China has 23 times more people than Burma, so the total number of believers is larger there.

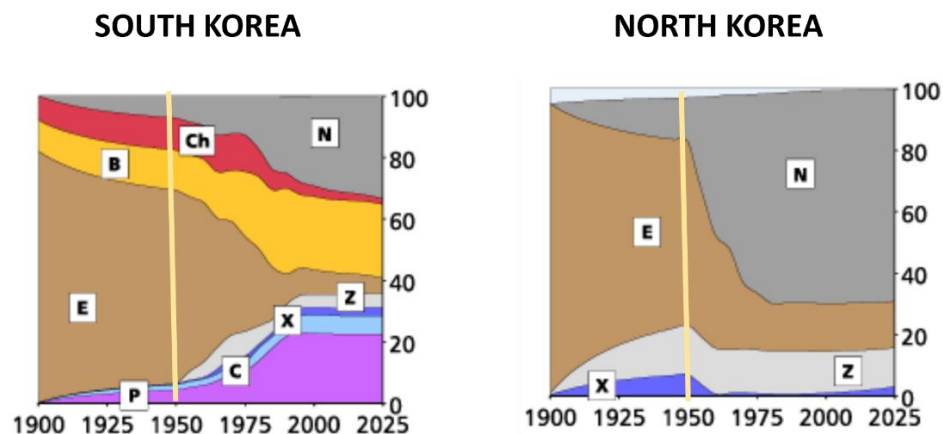
Now look at the comparison between China and North Korea. Both became Communistic countries just a few years apart but look at the difference in growth of believers, yet China has about 15% believers and North Korea has 1%. What this tells us is that some persecution can be good for growth while too much can have the opposite effect.



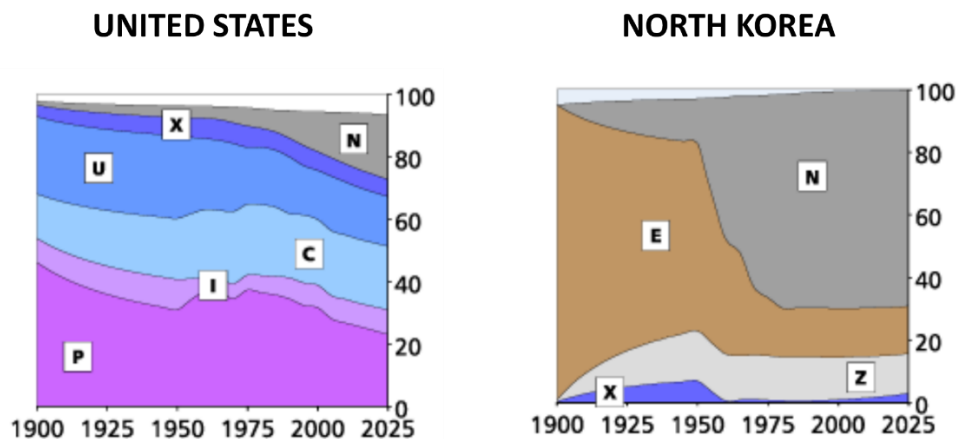
No one would ever say that any persecution is good. It's all evil but some is more evil than others. Notice the gray color area with the capital N. that represents the non-religious and in both cases, atheists make up half or more of the population.

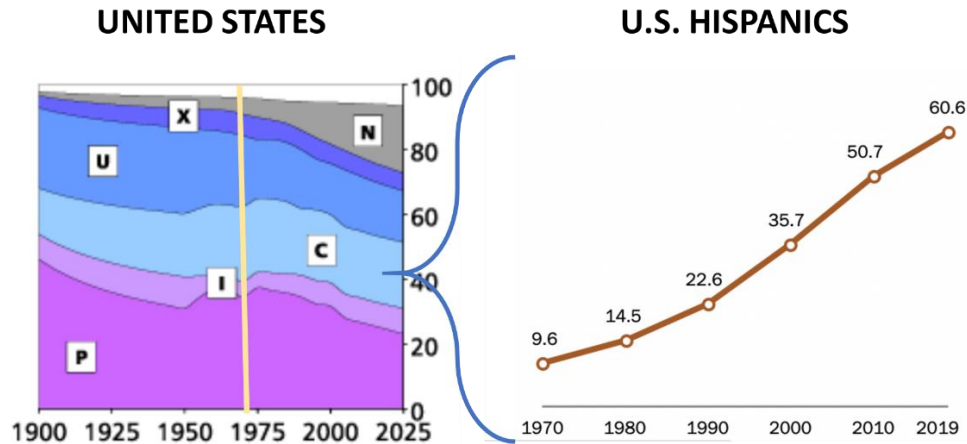
Now we compare North Korea with South Korea. First of all, notice how similar they are before 1950. The number of atheists (gray) and the number of Christians (purple and blue) have almost identical increases in both countries. But notice the devastating impact of Communism on North

Korea after 1950. In the absence of Communism, both countries would most likely have continued on the same path, but communism drove the population of atheists to 70% and immediately destroyed the church until it almost disappeared altogether.

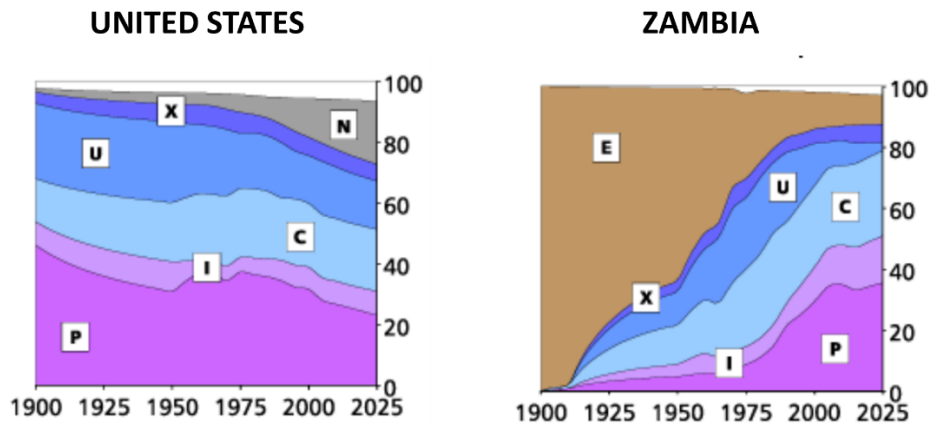


You wouldn't think there would be much similarity between North Korea and the United States but check this out. In 1900, over 95% of people identified as a Christian. Of course this is self-identification so no one is claiming they were true believers. There is a vast difference but there are two main similarities I want to point out. In both countries, the number of atheists has increased significantly, and the number of Christians has decreased. The number of Protestants has dropped from 40% to 20% and the only reason the number of Catholics has increased is due to an influx of 50 million Hispanics in the last fifty years, most of whom are Catholic. So we are far better off than North Korea but the trajectory is not encouraging.



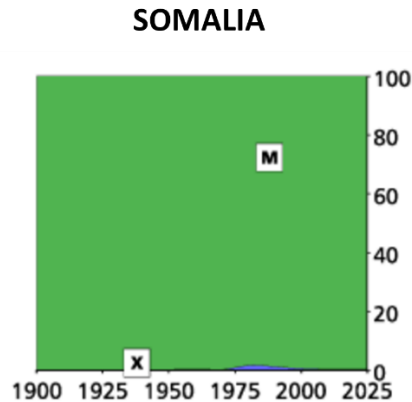
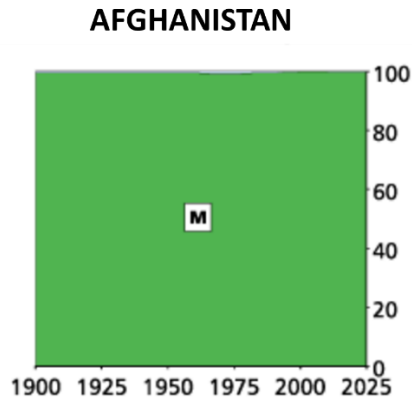


This is especially true when you compare it to a country like Zambia.



There could not be two more opposite trends in Christianity. Zambia went from zero to 90% self-identified believers and we went from 95% to 75%. Now the good news is that evangelicals are decreasing at a much slower rate than other protestants, but it is still in decline nevertheless.

To put things in perspective, here is one last comparison. It's easy to see why Afghanistan and Somalia are near the top of the persecution list.



Moreover, according to the Pew Research Center, government restrictions in the Americas is growing at a much faster rate than in the Middle East. Obviously, we are so much better off

Median scores on the Government Restrictions Index
Middle East-North Africa

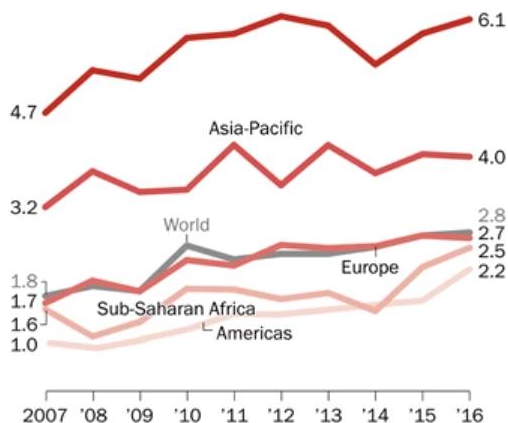


Image: Pew Research

than those in the Middle east and they are probably increasing in persecution at a slower rate than we are due to the fact that most of them already have near maximum restrictions. Nevertheless, the trend is discouraging.

What are some conclusions from all of this data? For one it's shocking to think that in 1993 almost 100% of Democrats supported the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and a mere twenty five years later, 100% of Democrats support the Equality Act. That does not bode well for the future whatsoever, especially when you consider Joe Biden's official policy platform.¹²

BIDEN
HARRIS

The Equality Act is the best vehicle for ensuring equal rights under the law for LGBTQ+ Americans, and will guarantee that LGBTQ+ individuals are protected under existing civil rights laws. **Biden will make enactment of the Equality Act during his first 100 days as President a top legislative priority.** Biden will also direct his Cabinet to ensure immediate and full enforcement of the Equality Act across all federal departments and agencies.

As a pastor I have never once endorsed a candidate but in this case, I make no apologies for being a little political. I think this is what it looks like to “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” The so-called Equality Act is being disguised as something else entirely. This is Biden’s introduction to the bill. “Joe Biden believes that every human being should be treated with respect and dignity and be able to live without fear no matter who they are or who they love.” It would be safe to say that 99.9% of all Americans would agree with this statement, but this statement is just a deceptive smokescreen for what is actually in the Equality Act.

As I have tried to show these past two weeks, politics and religious liberty are inseparable. We need to understand how to defend religious liberty and our politics are a necessary part of this. But even more importantly, we need to see that...

6. Persecution is a cause for rejoicing.

- **Rejoice because of our reward and our fellowship.**

¹¹ “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:11-12)

Why are we persecuted? You might say, “Because the persecutors are evil. They want to harm us.” That’s true, but we are persecuted because we belong to Jesus and persecution reminds us that we belong to him. We belong to him but our persecutors do not.

- **Rejoice because persecution spreads the gospel.**

“And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles” (Acts 8:1). “Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews” (Acts 11:19).

This is the history of the New Testament church. Persecution drove the gospel throughout the Roman Empire and then eventually to foreign lands. When Adinoram Judson entered Burma there were no converts and now there are 1.5 million believers there. It began with suffering and persecution and most of these 1.5 million believers are still experiencing persecution. As painful as it is, do you think they would choose to go back to their pagan religion to reduce their suffering?

We do need to defend religious liberty. It is a God given right and it is still enshrined in our constitution. But perhaps God intends that we lose some of it. Or a lot of it. God isn’t going to give us what we want but what he wants for us. He isn’t going to give us what we want but rather what we need. But why would he do such a thing? Persecution is evil, right? Why would God give us something evil? Was slavery in Egypt evil? Was bondage in Babylon evil? God is not evil but he does use the evil actions of men to accomplish his purposes.

- **Rejoice because persecution bears all kinds of fruit in our lives**

“Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring” (2 Thessalonians 1:4).

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43-44).

Richard Wurmbrand, who founded Voice of the Martyrs, recounts a conversation he overheard while in a Communist prison for fourteen years. “When one Christian was sentenced to death, he was allowed to see his wife before being executed. His last words to his wife were, ‘You must know that I die loving those who kill me. They don't know what they do and my last request of you is to love them, too. Don't have bitterness in your heart because they killed your beloved one. We will meet in heaven.’” ¹³

Are those who push for the Equality Act our enemies? Enemy seems like a strong word but if they are willing to persecute us for our beliefs then maybe it is accurate. Like the communists in Romania, many of them don't know what they do. Regardless, Jesus commanded us to pray for them. And to love them.

My challenge to everyone is to make a short list of your perceived enemies and pray for them every day for the next seven days. I think that praying for someone is the key to learning to love them. Tell God this is an impossible command to obey but you're willing to take a step of faith as he supplies the power.

Rich Maurer
November 15, 2020

¹ <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/slideshows/the-10-countries-with-the-most-religious-freedom-ranked-by-perception>

² Bi, trans, and nonbinary folks in Norway are celebrating a huge win after the country recently expanded its penal code that previously only protected lesbian and gay people from hate speech to include gender identity and all forms of “sexual orientation.”

The penal code states that those who are guilty of hate speech face a fine or up to a year in jail for private comments, and a maximum of three years in jail for public remarks.

<https://www.out.com/news/2020/11/11/norway-has-made-biphobic-transphobic-speech-illegal>

³ <https://www.gaytimes.co.uk/life/norway-bans-hate-speech-against-trans-and-bisexual-people/>

⁴ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/103rd-congress/house-bill/1308/text>

⁵ <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2013/13-354>

⁶ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/5/cosponsors?searchResultViewType=expanded>

⁷ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/equality-act-anti-christian/>

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/notes/robert-a-j-gagnon/the-most-dangerous-bill-of-our-time-the-so-called-equality-act/2723541137716981/>

⁹ <https://www.dailysignal.com/2019/04/08/look-to-states-for-preview-of-havoc-the-equality-act-would-wreak/>

¹⁰ <https://www.eagleobserver.com/news/2019/jun/12/equality-act-could-criminalize-christia/>

¹¹ <https://www.dailysignal.com/2019/05/09/how-equality-act-would-promote-abortion/>

¹² <https://joebiden.com/lgbtq-policy/>

¹³ <http://www.g4er.tk/books/Tortured%20For%20Christ.pdf>