

HOW TO HAVE AN ENEMY

**RIGHTEOUS ANGER
& THE WORK
OF PEACE**



**MELISSA
FLORES-BIXLER**

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Note to Readers

This guide will help readers use *How to Have an Enemy* by Melissa Florer-Bixler for individual study, group discussion, and pastoral teaching. It is broken up into twelve sections based on the book's twelve chapters. It is one thing to *understand* Florer-Bixler's points, but quite another to apply her radical ideas to our local communities, where they receive life.

Each section briefly summarizes the chapter and offers direct quotes to spur discussion. After naming the contents of the chapter, readers will interpret, relate, and apply sections of the chapter.

This study guide works for the individual, so you may read it alongside the text. But it also works with small groups and can be completed in three months, if used weekly. Florer-Bixler's book is rich and well researched, so pastors or leaders may find this guide helpful for composing sermons or teachings. Furthermore, the book's chapters stand on their own, in large part, so newcomers can join groups in the middle of the study series without a problem.

Florer-Bixler offers readers a prophetic witness of Christianity that is needed in this day and age. This study guide is for people who are tired of political quietism, who bear the weight of political pluralism in their congregations, and who want to do something about it. My hope is that this guide brings out the best in Florer-Bixler's book and motivates us to know who our enemies are and what it means to truly love them into transformation.



Chapter 1: **Who Is My Enemy?**

The opening image in this chapter refers to the famous Christmas Day truce during World War I, depicted in the film *Joyeux Noel*, where enemy soldiers “laid down their weapons to play football and sing carols on Christmas morning” (p. 20). Florer-Bixler says that this image is often used to demonstrate that our political differences can be overcome through relationships. But as she points out on pages 21–22, the Christmas Day truce of World War I is merely a myth:

As it turns out the Christmas Day ceasefire of World War I was not an epiphany of anti-war resistance often portrayed in popular culture. Officers, not soldiers, planned the truce in advance. The soldiers who participated were not punished for participating. While the truce is often portrayed as a secret, meant to hide the possibilities of peace from the public, records show information about the day was widely available. But most significant is that the men who participated in the truce readily picked up their weapons on December 26. They returned to battle against the soldiers they’d met the previous day.

The myth itself shows us that we long for relationships to overcome political enmity, but the reality reveals that they are not enough. Our differences are not merely personal, and so our solutions can’t be. Florer-Bixler writes, “power separates difference from enmity” (p. 28). Rather than personal reconciliation, “we are called to the reign of God” (p. 29). To live into “Jesus’ reign of love and peace,” we need to confront victimizers and oppressors and the power they wield.

INTERPRETING: What is the significance of the WWI truce? How have you seen it used to showcase that relationships alone can overcome political enmity? How does Florer-Bixler argue that this argument falls apart?

RELATING: Are you tempted to believe that relationships can overcome enmity? Why or why not? Is it because, as Florer-Bixler says, you are “upper-middle class and white” and “would thrive no matter who was elected to national office” (p. 21)? If you are a minority, do you think relationships alone fall short of living into the reign of God?

APPLYING: Let’s use Florer-Bixler’s questions directly: “Who is this Jesus around whom we center our identity?” (p. 24). What does it look like to live into the reign of God? How does it move us to structural solutions, as well as relational ones? How can we express the gospel as good news for both “the mother who catches her breath each time her Black child walks out the door” and “ICE agents who need to be saved from destruction to themselves and others” (p. 32)?



Chapter 2: Making Room for Enemies

On pages 36–37, Florer-Bixler writes:

Failure to attend to the bodies we bear, to the different work given to each of us, turns the good news into a strategy for quietism. A few years ago I heard a pastor offer up his church as a model for nonpartisan, apolitical worship. In his church, he bragged, ICE agents and undocumented people worship together and share the eucharist. I read this statement and wondered about the spiritual and emotional harm that occurs when we ask victims and their tormentors to be made one at the common meal of communion. What does it mean for us, as the body of Christ, to embody the unity of the Lord's supper with someone who, an hour later, could show up in uniform to kidnap someone from the same church, to disappear that person from the only life they know, to separate them from their family, friends, work, and community? I was not comforted by this thought. I was horrified.

This story showcases how political difference and enmity cannot be overcome by merely ignoring the fact that it exists. Doing so can cause harm, and is ultimately a failure to love our enemies. As Florer-Bixler puts it on page 41, “The challenge of the command to love your enemies and bless those who curse you (Matthew 5:44) is that Jesus assumes real violence, real degradation, real destruction.”

In this chapter, Florer-Bixler writes about how the above example of reconciliation and unity ignores the bodies we bear and the fact that we have legitimate enmity and enemies. Failure to acknowledge that erases the experiences of oppressed communities. Our identities, she says, are connected to power, and when we ignore that, we disproportionately burden “those who have the most to lose” (p. 42). We are then called not to ignore the differences in power we share, but to remind ourselves of how they divide us. Consciousness about these differences is how to have enemies.

INTERPRETING: What is the problem with the pastor sharing that he had both ICE agents and undocumented immigrants in his flock to showcase his church's nonpartisanship? Why is political quietism not a solution to loving our enemies?

RELATING: Did you share Florer-Bixler's horrified reaction to this story? Why or why not? What does it mean to you to consider having an enemy? Who are your enemies?

APPLYING: What does it look like in our churches and in our society to consider power as woven into who we are? Who holds power in our society? For now, let us name who holds power and toward whom the church might need to have enmity.



Chapter 3: **Praying for Enemies**

Reread these words from page 48:

There are beautiful songs written to accompany the first lines of Psalm 137, haunting melodies about a lost and destitute people. That loss turns to prayer. All of the songs I know written from Psalm 137 end with the first verses. We might forget that the psalm continues, that it changes from rippling water to torrential rapids, threatening to drown anyone in its path. It ends with words of death for the future generations of Babylon's children:

Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down!
Down to its foundations!"
O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!
Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock! (Psalm 137:7-9)

Florer-Bixler uses this psalm as an example of an imprecatory prayer for one's enemies. These psalms often make readers, especially nonviolent ones, uncomfortable. Sometimes these psalms are criticized as violent and vengeful. Florer-Bixler even quotes C. S. Lewis as calling them a "luxury of hatred." But it is easy for those of us in power to see the prayers of lamentation of the oppressed, of those who have true enemies that hate them, as excessive and inappropriate. When we judge how our siblings of faith grieve their oppression in prayer, we miss the opportunity to truly see them. Scripture never offers this kind of condemnation of the emotions expressed in the imprecatory psalms. And though we may be unable to imagine praying the prayers that the psalmists do, that may simply be because of our lack of experience. On page 57, Florer-Bixler describes the psalms this way:

The psalms that call for God's intervention are written as a reminder of the enormity of human suffering within systemic and sustained forms of violence that cannot always be rectified by good work, good intentions, or reasonable dialogue. They show us the way that power is structured across and within interpersonal relationships and geopolitical realities.

Jesus models this when he offers us the Lord's Prayer. First, he establishes the reign of God—as Florer-Bixler puts it, "Our Father in heaven. Your name is holy" (p. 58). Once we create that place, we ask for our needs. And this part of the original prayer is in an informal language, Aramaic. Florer-Bixler suggests that Jesus wants us to offer our authentic needs to God. Worrying about our tone, our politeness, or whether we sound peaceful enough, mutes our needs. Perhaps seeing the imprecatory psalms as expressions of the needs of people is one way we can pray for our enemies.

INTERPRETING: Reread the above psalm. What is happening in the prayer? Why is the psalmist praying for such horrors for his enemies?



RELATING: Do the imprecatory psalms make you uncomfortable? Alternatively, does the above psalm comfort you? What experiences do you think people must live through to find comfort or discomfort with this psalm? What has your experience been like with praying for your enemies?

APPLYING: Write your own imprecatory psalm. Drawing on the discussion from chapter 2, consider who your enemies are, and then write a prayer that honestly reflects your need to be liberated from your enemies.

Chapter 4: **Shared Anger and Forgiveness**

On page 64, Florer-Bixler quotes Willie Jennings to describe the importance of anger for hope, as well as the importance of shared anger:

Jennings writes that the discipline of hope in this racial world, “in this white supremacist-infested country called the United States of America, requires anger.” This is not anger that must be converted to peace, as if anger is the inverse of peace. Instead, Jennings writes, “This anger, my anger, is connected to the righteous indignation of God.” He confesses that there is “great danger and great power” in drawing the connection between God’s anger and our anger. We can identify this connection when we ascertain certain characteristics. One is that our anger must be shareable. It is not enough for those who encounter the suffering of others, of racial violence, to say, “I can’t imagine what you are feeling.” Instead, Jennings writes,

One of the most stubborn barriers to overcoming this racial world is the refusal of so many people to take hold of black anger. It is a particular sickness of whiteness that invites people to imagine themselves as spectators of racial suffering and observers of black pain who are allowed to feel only assorted forms of white guilt.

The opposite of shared anger is prolonged patience, or the refusal to ever get angry at injustice. Sharing anger means sharing understanding with the oppressed. On page 69, Florer-Bixler goes on to say that too much patience for our “intolerable differences” can cause harm:

The communal life of the church, at its best, does not hold a center of limitless, tolerable difference. It makes space for those “grave differences,” while recognizing that there are both tolerable and intolerable differences. The shift from difference to enmity is bound up in power—who has access to it and who does not, and how it is used against some for the flourishing of others

Thomas Aquinas offers a warning through the words of John Chrysostom: “Unreasonable patience is the hotbed of many vices, it fosters negligence, and incites not only the wicked but even the good to do wrong.”

INTERPRETING: Read Matthew 18:23-35:

For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, “Have patience with me,



and I will pay you everything.” And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, “Pay what you owe.” Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.” But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, “You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?” And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

This is a story of radical forgiveness, but also an expression of God’s anger. In God, there is room for both compassion and anger. What is significant about the king handing over to be tortured the individual who wouldn’t forgive (Florer-Bixler calls it handing him over to the old order)? What does that tell us about God’s anger?

RELATING: What are the differences that we have between us? Which are tolerable? Which are intolerable? Where is our enmity bound up in power?

APPLYING: Willie Jennings convicts us to not be merely spectators of Black anger, but to join it. How can we do that as individuals, as communities, or as leaders? What hesitations do we have? When have you felt that you could really express it, or really join in?

Chapter 5: **Mary’s Politics**

The gospel of Luke confronts the enemies of the people of God. Specifically, Florer-Bixler makes the point that it directly names as enemies Herod the Great and Herod Antipas. In Luke 13, the Pharisees (who are often wrongly seen as enemies of Jesus—see chapter 8) actually warn Jesus that Herod wants to kill him. But Jesus resists protecting himself and names Herod as a fox, seemingly embracing his own death. By naming Herod a fox, he is naming him as a dishonest leader who “jockeys for power but is ultimately revealed as impotent and reviled” (p. 82). Jesus is purposely antagonizing his enemy to the point of death.

But who is Herod’s opposition? Florer-Bixler says it’s a “teenager, pregnant outside of marriage, a poor girl from a backwater town on the outskirts of the capital city” (p. 82).

On page 84, Florer-Bixler writes, “The reign of God begins in the body of Mary. . . . Mary is the first priest, the first to offer Jesus’ body to the world.” Mary sings her powerful song after she agrees to birth the Savior. She says that God has looked upon her with favor, despite her lowly stature. She praises God who is changing the world, “high made low, empty made full” (p. 85). He will topple rulers from their thrones, as Jesus institutes the reign of God. Mary’s song invites us to upend our own world, “not to install a new regime, to turn the tables so that now the rich are made the servants of the poor. Instead, Jesus will remove the mechanisms of this order entirely” (p. 86).



Mary is showcasing the lack of “distinction between religion and politics” (p. 86). And it is once again evidence of how the gospel reorders our entire world. Mary remains today an agent who encourages women to continue to resist oppressive forces.

INTERPRETING: Read Luke 1:46-56:

And Mary said,
“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Mary sings this right after the annunciation. What hope is Mary holding on to? How does this song showcase the political reordering that the birth of Jesus offers?

RELATING: The gospel of Luke makes it clear that Jesus, through Mary, will reorder the world. What is your reaction to the political fight into which Jesus is entering? And why do you think our Christmas narratives shy away from the clear political meaning of the holiday?

APPLYING: How can we use Mary’s song and story today to inspire women to resist oppression? How can we do that as individuals, as communities, and as leaders?



Chapter 6: **Love Your Enemies**

But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. (Luke 6:27-29)

In this chapter, Florer-Bixler argues that the command of enemy love, found in Luke and Matthew, is often used to extend oppression. She quotes Daniel White Hodge and James Cone as suggesting that loving one's enemy is a form of oppression, not a source of freedom.

So if loving our enemies often leads to oppression, why does Jesus offer this command “to the poorest and most vulnerable” (p. 93) in the ancient world? Florer-Bixler says the command is not just a new rule but rather a public imagination of what is possible to open up a new order.

On pages 94–96, Florer-Bixler recounts the journey of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who after *Kristallnacht*, abandoned the theme of enemy love in his books. But near the end of his life, he concluded that enemy love isn't an abstraction, it is concrete, lived into by community. The community is given the instruction to love enemies not as an either-or directive, but rather as a way to consider following God in a new way. As Florer-Bixler explains, “Jesus' troubling statements to his disciples and followers, be they about money or marriage, treason or taxes, serve as eruptions that shake loose the confines of their imaginations” (p. 96).

Florer-Bixler continues, “In the teaching to ‘turn the other cheek’ Jesus does not call us to passive reception of violence but instead to dismantle the power of the old order in creative, life-giving ways” (p. 101).

INTERPRETING: How is enemy love often used to place an additional burden on the oppressed? What was Jesus' intent with the command? Why does it get misused in ways that burden the oppressed?

RELATING: What is your experience with this command to love your enemies? How has it been used in your life? What does it mean for you?

APPLYING: How can we embody the ethic of enemy love today to subvert the social order? What does it look like to embody an enemy love that isn't merely passive? How can we nonviolently resist the social order while also upending it?



Chapter 7: **Undoing Family**

To illustrate how family is undone by following in the radical reordering of Jesus, Florer-Bixler cites the story of C. P. Ellis and Ann Atwater. Ann Atwater is a celebrated leader of civil rights, and C. P. Ellis was, at the time, the Grand Cyclops of the KKK. Both lived in Durham, North Carolina, in the 1970s and were selected to set the agenda for meetings around the desegregation of public schools. While both were skeptical of this arrangement, they eventually learned that they had more in common than apart, and that they could work together. Florer-Bixler notes that while this story is often used to demonstrate the possibility of reconciliation through relationships, there is more to the story than that. For Florer-Bixler, this story shows how to be made right, Ellis “had to uproot himself” from the community that reinforced his white supremacy (p. 107).

Sometimes uprooting yourself from family is what it takes to follow Jesus. In Luke 12:51-53, Jesus explains how following him can undo our earthly families as we find our new family with him:

Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on, five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided:

father against son
and son against father,
mother against daughter
and daughter against mother,
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

Judaism has an impulse to relativize the value of family when the family contradicts the law of God; but, Florer-Bixler writes, “Jesus intensifies this already existing impulse within Judaism. He prophesies a reign of God that will break apart families as with a sword” (p. 109). She adds that Westerners, because of how we economically and socially value family life, are hard-pressed to understand the radicality of the teachings of Jesus. But Jesus’ teachings change all that, and ask for loyalty to Jesus alongside those others who have also disrupted their lives. Jesus demonstrates this further by including outsiders from beyond the household in his table fellowship as well.

INTERPRETING: Reread the story of C. P. Ellis and Ann Atwater (pp. 105–108). What strikes you from the story? Do you connect with Florer-Bixler’s takeaway? Then reread the Luke passage above. What is Jesus asking us to do?

RELATING: Florer-Bixler uses the Thanksgiving table as an analogy to Jesus’ teaching. She writes, “As you have intuited, this is not a prescriptive book, offering rules about words you ought to say to your bigoted sister or your father who is enmeshed in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. But I do hope that, as Christians, we live as people grounded in the life of Jesus” (p. 114). Talk about your discernment around table fellowship with your family members. Are political differences merely abstract? Why or why not?

APPLYING: Justo González suggests that Jesus moves us from the nuclear family to *familia*, a widening circle of people, not just nuclear family. Ada María Isasi-Díaz uses the language “kin-dom of God” to express a similar widening of our families. We are moving to a new sort of understanding of family. How do you think we can express *familia* in our churches and society today?



Chapter 8: Know Your Enemy

In this chapter, Florer-Bixler critiques the tendency among Christians to see the polemics in the New Testament as a justification for anti-Semitic rhetoric and violence. And although the New Testament does have moments of generalized anti-Jewish hostility, that is not always the case. In this chapter we see a new way to approach the discourse that Jesus engages in with other Jewish people.

In the first century, the distinction between Christianity and Judaism didn't exist as starkly as it does today. And as with today's Christianity, Judaism then (and today) had multiple traditions and forms. Jesus' enmity appears to be different from the "tenor of conversation we would [use] for interreligious dialogue" because he was having a "conversation within the family of Israel" (p. 126).

Jesus' disagreements with the Pharisees, in particular, are a reaction to a specific movement. His intention is to deepen the law's practice and its resonance with his community. Contrary to popular belief, Jesus is not abolishing purity laws; rather, he is eliminating "the source of the contagion itself, the forces of death at the root of impurity" (p. 128).

Knowing our enemies can prevent us from harm and destruction of them, as we see throughout Christian history. Florer-Bixler summarizes it this way: "When we turn Jesus' rancor for one sect's version of law-keeping into abrogation of the law of Moses, we lose out on the hopeful possibility of what we can discover for ourselves in these conflicts. Disinformation is a scandalous source of enmity" (p. 132).

INTERPRETING: How do Christians get the relationship between Jesus and other Jewish people in the New Testament wrong? How has it led to anti-Semitic rhetoric and violence?

RELATING: On page 132, Florer-Bixler writes, "When the church assumes that one of many sectarian groups in the ancient world is a stand-in for all Jews, we distort enmity." Where do you think we do this today? Where are we simplifying or distorting our enmity?

APPLYING: On page 133, the author writes, "When we fail to do this work [of knowing our enemies], our response to relationships of conflict falls somewhere between two well-worn paths. The first is to assume that anyone different from me is an enemy, that every person who does not share my commitments, values, or beliefs is a threat to that for which I've worked and that which I love. Anyone who stands in the way of my commitments must be eliminated." How can we avoid this trap? We have real enemies who need to be transformed and different enemies who can be tolerated, dialogued with, and related to—what are examples of each of those in our society?



Chapter 9: Jesus Draws the Line

It is easy for white people today to celebrate the victory of the civil rights era without acknowledging that at the time, Martin Luther King Jr. had a 60 percent disapproval rating. During the civil rights movement, the importance of anti-racism was not the forgone conclusion it is now.

Florer-Bixler shares her sensitivity to the harm caused by white Christians who eventually moved positions on civil rights by offering her own journey toward LGBTQ inclusion. On page 138 she writes, “And I began to see the line in the Bible that Jesus draws between himself and the powerful. Eventually I had to make a choice. I decided I would put myself on the side of the line where I saw Jesus.”

Today, in terms of inclusion, we follow the example of Gentile inclusion in Acts. This inclusion demonstrates tolerance, which is a virtue, until we intersect it with power, in which case it can be dangerous. Power changes our differences into something more.

Paul encourages tolerance of one another and of mutual differences. But when power enters the picture, Paul changes his approach. In 1 Corinthians 11, we see Paul’s preference for “lower-class, economically marginal people,” whom he calls “the Weak,” versus “the Strong,” well-off people (see p. 144). The Strong are wealthy and educated, and during the communion meal, they’ve eaten all the food by the time the laborers—the Weak—arrive. While the Strong are right about eating meat sacrificed to idols, Paul asks that the Strong change to accommodate the Weak because they do so at their own expense. This is much more than mere tolerance.

Florer-Bixler argues that when we do not consider power among our differences, we risk harming those who are oppressed, and allow “those dispossessed of power” to incur a cost.

INTERPRETING: How does tolerance of people who oppose LGBTQ inclusion harm members of the LGBTQ community? How does Dante Stewart conclude that predominantly white evangelism fails the project of anti-racism?

RELATING: “Jesus draws a line and places himself on one side of it. He asks us to stand there with him. We leave behind our old lives to join him there” (p. 149). Where does that move you to go? What does it look like for us to leave behind our old lives and habits?

APPLYING: What examples have you witnessed of the practice of tolerating the intolerable leading to harm? Have you participated in any? Where is Jesus asking us to draw the line?



Chapter 10: **Becoming Enemies to Mammon**

“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth [Mammon]” (Matthew 6:24).

Mammon isn't just cash—it is also power that gives us access to everything. In this chapter, Florer-Bixler makes it clear that one cannot worship God and Mammon, and that if one prospers from Mammon, one is indeed worshipping Mammon. She uses the story of the wealthy young man to showcase how we might get rid of our wealth in order to worship God. We must become enemies of Mammon. This is not about philanthropy or charity, but is rather a reorientation.

Florer-Bixler explains that reparations for slavery are an example of this sort of reorientation. Antiracism is incomplete without considering the theft by white folks from Black folks, and it is incomplete without economic restoration.

Looking to the Bible, Florer-Bixler uses the example in Luke 7:36-50, where Jesus tells Simon the story of the two debtors after a lower-class woman joins Jesus at Simon's table. In this story, the one who has the greater debt forgiven loves Jesus more. Jesus applies the story to equalize the woman and Simon, who by merit of his wealth “owes” Jesus a smaller debt.

Florer-Bixler suggests that committing to poverty for ourselves is not an adequate reorientation—we must change inequitable systems in the world, like cash bail, for example. She concludes the chapter this way: “Becoming enemies to Mammon means taking up a life that recognizes how wealth is built and maintained through exploitation” (p. 169).

INTERPRETING: Consider Luke 7:36-50:

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.” Jesus spoke up and said to him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” “Teacher,” he replied, “speak.” “A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?” Simon answered, “I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt.” And Jesus said to him, “You have judged rightly.” Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” Then he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”



How does a conversation about reparations, in particular, relate to this story? What conversations or hesitations are you having about reparations, and how does this story change them? Do you relate more to Simon or to the woman?

RELATING: Florer-Bixler uses the lavish life of Jesus to demonstrate that abundance, not asceticism, follows our reorientation. How does it feel to imagine a reorientation where we are all well off, and not impoverished or “ascetic”?

APPLYING: What’s the difference between charity and reparations? What do you feel more inclined to do? What is the current social order asking you to do? What is Jesus asking us to do? Where does an economic reorientation need to occur?

Chapter 11: **Whiteness and the Enemy**

How do we make an enemy of whiteness? First, on pages 172–73, Florer-Bixler defines whiteness using the words of both Sara Ahmed and Willie Jennings:

“Whiteness is only invisible for those who inhabit it, or those who get so used to its inhabitance that they learn not to see it, even when they are not it.” (Sara Ahmed, “Declarations of Whiteness”)

“Whiteness is not the equal and opposite of blackness. It is not one racial flavor next to others. Whiteness is a way of imagining the world moving around you, flowing around your body with you being at the center. Whiteness is a way of imagining the true, the good, and the beautiful configured around white bodies. Whiteness is a way of imagining oneself as the central facilitating reality of the world, the reality that makes sense of the world, that interprets, organizes, and narrates the world, and whiteness is having the power to realize and sustain that imagination.” (Jennings, “To Be a Christian Intellectual”)

Florer-Bixler writes of whiteness as the “old order under the sway of Satan” (p. 174). Whiteness possesses, turning individuals and systems over to Satan. But the battle between Satan and God is one where God will surely be victorious.

A different sort of possession overcomes Peter when he expects Jesus to wage war with Rome using the world’s tools: “There is no room in Peter’s imagination for a Jesus who will cut to the very source of death itself—overcoming Satan’s power over Earth” (p. 175).

Judas demonstrates another example of possession that is not unlike what Jesus resisted in his temptation, or what Jesus rebuked in Peter when he wanted Jesus to be a king like Caesar.

Peter’s redemption at the end of the gospel of John showcases that “only our collective action toward a renewed order can exorcise” the demon of whiteness (p. 186).

INTERPRETING: The author writes, “In the Gospels, the temptation of Jesus by Satan and the rebuke of Peter name the same outcome—the world handed over for domination” (p. 181). Where else do we see this world being handed over to domination around us? What does Florer-Bixler suggest is a solution? What do you think?



RELATING: If you're white, how do you define whiteness? What is your experience with it? If you are a person of color, how do you define it, and what's your experience with it?

APPLYING: As Florer-Bixler points out, despite the sordid history of whiteness possessing the United States, "unlike countries like Germany, Rwanda, and South Africa, the United States has not named, repented, and paid reparation for the past that shapes our current reality. We refuse to remember" (p. 179). How can Americans, especially, remember this history and do something about it?

Chapter 12: **The End of Enemies**

John writes the book of Revelation after the fall of Jerusalem, to people who are war-torn and oppressed, with no place to call home. The assurance of God's justice and judgment is the essence of Revelation. It's a "mean book," as Brian Blount says, even if it's not mean-spirited (p. 188).

James Baldwin offered a warning of an apocalypse after the American refusal to confront white supremacy. In Revelation, John does something similar, showing us "the threats of power and violence threatening the region" using "the image of four warriors on horseback" (p. 191).

The first warrior represents war; the second, "external threats of violence to the disruption and violence within their society"; the third, economic destruction; and the fourth, death itself. "The four horsemen are an admonition, as they are in every age, of the catastrophe human beings bring to creation" (p. 192).

INTERPRETING: On page 196, Florer-Bixler writes that Revelation "is a frightening book. But it is preserved for us so that in every generation we awake from our sleep, pulled out of moderation and moved into a form of life where, if we live as Jesus lives, we will stand against the work of death in its brutal and benign forms."

After reading chapter 12, what is your view of the purpose and meaning of the book of Revelation?

RELATING: Answer Florer-Bixler's questions on page 194 directly: "Will we take our place among the faithful who also become the victims through their active witness against the power of death? Or will we continue to get along within the peace of quietism and conformity?"

APPLYING: On pages 193–94, Florer-Bixler writes,

[James] Baldwin's earlier writing is a treatise on the impossible wonder of a human community that he believed all people desired to protect from disaster. A decade later he returns to these thoughts: "It is terrible to watch people cling to their captivity and insist on their own destruction. I think black people have always felt this about America, and Americans, and have always seen, spinning above the thoughtless American head, the shape of the wrath to come." To read the apocalypse of John, to live in the world, is to participate in the making of our own destruction and to watch it circle above us.

How do you relate to the author's connection between James Baldwin and Revelation? Are we participating in our own destruction? Resisting conformity with the ways of the world means saving ourselves—what will it take for our communities to be collectively opposed to the enemy that is death?

