Today’s Gospel is one of the most controversial ones. A lot of us don’t understand the context of the times though. In Jesus’ time, if you publicly were exposed, it was a crime. If you went an extra mile carrying a load, it was a crime. If you hit someone with the back of the left hand it was considered unclean. So, knowing this, now let’s look again at what Jesus is saying. When He says turn the other cheek He doesn’t mean back down completely, but rather, challenge peacefully. When He says “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek turn to them the other,” (Matt 5), we need to get the context. In order for a person to strike you on the left cheek, he/she would have to use the back of his/her unclean (left) hand which would contaminate them spiritually. He’s saying challenge them but don’t return unnecessary violence.

When He says go the extra mile, in Roman society a soldier could ask a man to help him by carrying his load for a mile. However, if he made him go more than that, it was a crime because the load could be heavy. Soldiers had to travel long distances and needed to get help at times but there was a legal limit. Jesus is saying challenge in a peaceful way if possible.

Finally, Jesus says to give your cloak to someone who takes your tunic. You shouldn’t be exposed in public. Therefore, if someone is causing you to be indecently exposed, it would be a crime. Again, Jesus is telling us to challenge in humble manner.

It is important to understand this because it supports the Church’s teaching on Just War Theory. The Church teaches for example, World War II was a just war, though dropping the atomic bomb was not. Why? Well, Just War Theory basically states to exhaust all means for peace before fighting. Also, the overall good must outweigh the bad, if a country decides to go to war. In miniature, if someone’s in trouble in the street, you should protect them if you can, but not if it’s going to get more people hurt in the process. However, it’s never okay to hurt innocent life. We should not have dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Also, you do have a right to self-defense if your life or health is in serious danger. However, I believe Jesus is saying to avoid retaliation as long as possible, even to the point of possible humiliation and non-lethal blows.

In conclusion, Jesus wants us to love our enemies, pray for them and do all we can to win them over, including suffering for them if possible. God loves and created our enemies. God believes in their potential. He doesn’t create junk. We need to love them too. However, we also have an obligation to protect innocent life.