

“LOVE YOUR ENEMIES”—EVEN IN THE AGE OF TERRORISM?*

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary situation of the “war on terrorism” provides a particularly challenging environment in which to seek to interpret and apply Jesus’ commandment to love our enemies. This commandment received major emphasis during the first few centuries of the church, but subsequent interpretation of it has become increasingly complex. Nevertheless, I argue for the broad applicability of the commandment and show that it provides a check against the polarizing and dehumanizing tendencies which accompany modern warfare, because an understanding of the love of enemies reveals that the real enemy is enmity itself. Finally, the article examines a group of sermons preached in the immediate aftermath of September 11 and concludes that while the majority neglect to speak of love for enemies, those preachers that do are able to bring it to bear in relevant and powerful ways.

The contemporary situation of the “war on terrorism” provides a particularly challenging environment in which to seek to interpret and apply Jesus’ commandment to love our enemies. A striking commandment with potentially dramatic political implications, it has always proved difficult to fulfill—but especially in times of great crisis and war. Yet it is an important and relatively unique aspect of the Christian message, and received major emphasis during the first few centuries of the church as a key trait of the true Christian. In later historical periods, however, interpretation of this commandment has become increasingly complex. The first part of this paper will examine the biblical idea

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of enemy-love and briefly touch on some of the historical developments in its interpretation in an effort to throw light on its possible interpretation and application today. In the second part, the paper will examine a volume of sermons preached in the immediate aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, DC. Analysis of these sermons will reveal how some Christians in the current context understand and seek to apply the challenging commandment of enemy-love.

Biblical Texts on Love of Enemy

The commandment to love our enemies appears in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7), and the Sermon on the Plain in the Gospel of Luke (6:20–49). In addition, forms of the commandment and some early interpretations of it are found in Paul’s letters. In these scriptural sources, there are numerous justifications given for the commandment, as well as explanations of what it might require. Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount states that our love of enemies is based on imitation of God. We observe through natural phenomena that God is gracious towards all (Matt. 5:45); similarly, as children of God, we must extend grace towards all. Luke’s account also suggests imitating God (6:35, 36). In this portrayal, the character of God is that of a merciful God who seeks out all sinners, attempting to draw them into God’s love.¹ This is a picture of a God whose love is larger than we can imagine, and whose love extends beyond the boundaries of our own community to embrace even our enemies. While such a God is ultimately beyond our comprehension, this love is also something that can be grasped in our human experience. In fact, the commandment to love our enemies is explained on the basis of our experience of God’s love and mercy; it is directly followed by the justification, “be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful” (Lk 6:36). We are able to be merciful because we see that God “is kind to the unthankful and evil” (Lk 6:35).

Our experience of this mercy is, in itself, a testimony to the most remarkable way in which God has demonstrated love for enemies: God has shown mercy to *us*, despite the ways we have shown enmity toward God by sinning. According to Paul’s letter to the Romans, God loved us while we were still God’s enemies: “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us...while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son.”² Thus,

1. Luise Schottroff, “‘Give to Caesar What Belongs to Caesar and to God What Belongs to God’: A Theological Response of the Early Christian Church to Its Social and Political Environment,” in *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 237.

2. Excerpts from Romans 5:6–10.

The admonition to love one's enemies is based on the good news of God's mercy toward those who are evil and unjust. Peacemakers [i.e. *hoi eirenepoioi* in the beatitude "Blessed are the peacemakers"], then, know themselves to be blessed and loved by God and are therefore able to demonstrate love and concern for their enemies.³

As part of their new relationship with God as redeemed, beloved children, then, Christians are expected to assume this new identity based on love, an identity which reflects God's perfect character. Such an identity is also an imitation of Jesus; his incarnation and earthly ministry were a reflection of the all-encompassing love of the Father. He extended himself into the world on account of this love, and then showed this love to prostitutes and tax collectors—people who were typically seen as "enemies" of God because of their lives of sin. Jesus also prayed for forgiveness for those who killed him. So, to be children of God and disciples of Christ, we must have a similar relationship to the world. As Perkins puts it,

anything less [than loving one's enemies] is merely playing by human standards: "For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? (Matt. 5:46-47)."⁴

In addition to being an expression of faith in and gratitude for the mercy of God, love of enemy is also (according to some interpreters) motivated by faith in God's promise to punish injustice and reward the faithful. This seems to be Paul's reasoning in Romans 12:

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (vv. 19–21)

Piper interprets this passage as follows:

With this complete confidence in the righteousness of God the Christian is freed to love his enemy. He is freed not only from the fear of death and of all threats to his ego, but he is now also freed from the insidious tendency in every man to keep an account of wrongs (1 Cor 13:6) in the name of justice. The assurance that God will take vengeance justly on the evil of unrepentant animosity removes the last hindrance to enemy-love.⁵

3. Richard L. Jeske, "Peace in the New Testament," in *The Church's Peace Witness*, ed. Marlin E. Miller and Barbara Nelson Gingerich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 144.

4. Pheme Perkins, "Apocalyptic Sectarianism and Love Commands: The Johannine Epistles and Revelation," in *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 287.

5. John Piper, "Love Your Enemies": *Jesus' Love Command in the Synoptic Gospels and in the Early Christian Paraenesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 118.

The reference to heaping coals upon their head is not meant to encourage people to eagerly look forward to seeing the punishment meted out. That vengeful attitude would be incompatible with true love of enemy. Instead, Piper explains that we should understand Paul as saying, essentially: We are to love our enemies in the hope that our love will reveal God's love to them and so transform them (remembering our own need to be transformed as well); at the same time we know that if they do not respond to love (ours or God's), they will be punished. "So Paul would be saying, 'If the one, who in spite of his enmity received love, nevertheless remains an enemy, he will not escape the wrath of God,'"⁶ and the love he has received adds to his guilt, therefore, adding coals upon his head. Paul seems to be responding to a common protest that arises against the commandment to love our enemies: it simply seems unjust and obviously unfair. Romans 12, therefore, grounds the notion of enemy-love in the righteousness of God. It is God's justice that will prevail. Also, God's ultimate justice will eventually provide a reward for those who persevere in loving their enemies, as Luke 5:35 promises.

Enemy-love may also have strategic motivation. In some patristic writers, as we shall see, love of enemies is an important way for Christians to earn the admiration of others and may even, according to some writers, lead to the conversion of the Christians' enemies. Love of enemies may also provide a means to make peace with one's enemies—there seems to be a link between peacemakers and those who love their enemies, since both are referred to as children of God (compare Matt. 5:9 and 5:45). Overall, however, it seems that the most prevalent and important foundation which the Scriptures offer for the love of enemies is the idea that Christians should imitate the character of God.

It is a complex matter, however, to understand how to imitate God's character. What does it mean to love one's enemies in actual practice? It turns out that Christians are not merely commanded to be reactive in a peaceful way and avoid retaliating against their enemies (as we see in Matt. 5:39), but are also to be proactive, seeking opportunities to show mercy to them. The Sermon on the Mount itself gives some specifics: bless them, do good to them, and pray for them (Matt. 5:44). Loving one's enemies also includes greeting other people, even those whom we would rather avoid (see Matt. 5:47). Paul offers a similarly concrete description of what is required: "If your enemy hungers, feed him; if he thirsts, give him a drink..." (Rom. 12:20). Furthermore, the parable of the Good Samaritan could be interpreted as a description of the actions that love for one's enemy requires, given that a Samaritan would have been regarded by Jesus' listeners as an enemy (and vice versa).⁷ Of course, this

6. Ibid.

7. Luke 10:25–37.

story is told in response to the question of "Who is my neighbor?" Implicit in that question is a desire to limit the scope of whom one must love. But in answering, Jesus turns the question away from the *object* of love, and instead asks, "Which of these three was a neighbor [to the wounded man]?" Once again, the focus is on *our loving* and not on the appropriateness of whom we are to love, whether friend or enemy. In this way, we find that there is no distinction between the commandments to love one's neighbor and love one's enemy; the love is a characteristic of the lover and is not dependent upon the characteristics of the person loved. The commandment to love our enemies reveals to us that even the human categories of "friend" and "enemy" become irrelevant in the face of true love.

Love of Enemies in Other Early Christian Writings

The advice to love one's enemies did not originate with Jesus. Analogues exist in both pagan and Jewish sources, and even give similar warrants for such love. But in the Christian context, this commandment was given a new centrality and increased emphasis. PHEME PERKINS writes that

What is unusual about the Christian case is the insistence that "love of enemies" should be the policy of the whole community, since it was central to both the teaching and the life of its founder. "Love of enemies" is not merely an option for the pious to show that they are above anger and enmity. It is to be the community's response...⁸

The love of enemies is a particular marker for the early Christian community. We see a firm recognition of this in many documents of the early church (besides the New Testament). Klassen writes that "It was the most frequently cited saying of Jesus in the second century, especially by the Apologists as evidence that the early Christians were not haters of humankind."⁹ For instance, the early Christian document known as the Didache (a proto-catechism) begins with the commandments to love God and neighbor, and then immediately goes on to explain: "What these maxims teach is this: 'Bless those who curse you' and 'Pray for your enemies.' For 'what credit is it to you if you love those who love you? Is that not the way the heathen act?' But 'you must love those who hate you.'"¹⁰ Thus, love of enemies is a central, crucial aspect of the more general love commandments.

In the second letter of Clement, we also see clearly that the commandment to love one's enemies was seen as a key Christian tenet which must be upheld.

8. Perkins, "Apocalyptic Sectarianism and Love Commands," 287.

9. Klassen, "Love Your Enemies," 8.

10. In J. Philip Wogaman and Douglas M. Strong, eds, *Readings in Christian Ethics: A Historical Sourcebook* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996), 13.

In this case, the love of enemies is seen as particularly important for showing the truth and superiority of the Christian message to outsiders—a common justification for the commandment then as well as later. He writes,

For when the heathen hear God's oracles on our lips they marvel at their beauty and greatness. But afterwards, when they mark that our deeds are unworthy of the words we utter, they turn from this to scoffing, and say that it is a myth and a delusion. When, for instance, they hear from us that God says, "It is no credit to you if you love those who love you, but it is to your credit if you love your enemies and those who hate you," when they hear these things, they are amazed at such surpassing goodness. But when they see that we fail to love not only those who hate us, but even those who love us, then they mock at us and scoff at the Name.¹¹

Here, we see already that living out such a challenging, idealistic commandment was proving to be a problem for Christians. It is a problem that recurs, of course, and has led some to assume that the commandment is inapplicable and should be more or less ignored. Emphasizing it would simply expose Christians as greater hypocrites and lead to more "scoffing at the Name." Yet Clement does not take that tack, despite his acknowledgment of the problem. Rather, he places this comment in the context of a call to repentance and renewed commitment to *obeying* the commandment. The difficulty of its application does not, for him, decrease its importance.

Other early references to this commandment include the Epistle to Diognetus, in which we read that Christians are to the world what the soul is to the body, and accordingly, "Christians love those who hate them."¹² And in Athenagoras' letter to the emperors on behalf of Christians, he provides a summary of Christian moral teaching in which the love of enemies is the central piece. He says that he is writing in the hope that

by showing that the teachings themselves, to which we are attached, are not human, but were declared and taught by God, we can persuade you not to hold us for atheists. What, then, are these teachings in which we are reared? "I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven, who makes his sun to shine on the evil and on the good, and sends his rain on the just and on the unjust."¹³

For Athenagoras, then, the challenging nature of the commandment to love your enemies is simply proof of its divine origin. It is evidence for the spiritual superiority of the Christian teaching, as well as the spiritual superiority of the Christians themselves. Regardless of subsequent interpretive difficulties, for these authors, it is a simple fact that Christians love their enemies.

11. Ibid., 16.

12. Ibid., 18.

13. Ibid., 26.

From a Radical Minority to the Christian Empire

As a small and intermittently persecuted minority, Christians had little choice about how to respond to their enemies. If they tried to respond to their oppressors violently or hatefully, they could potentially provoke further oppression. In this way, Jesus' advice to love their enemies could actually be regarded as simply a practical option. To be sure, the degree to which Christians are urged to be proactive in their love of enemies is unique, but it can be seen as merely an extension of what is, first of all, practical advice. The early Christian community was politically irrelevant; therefore they probably saw the commandment to love their enemies as relatively apolitical, and without major implications for the broader society. Furthermore, the earliest Christian communities apparently regarded their present situation as very temporary. They expected the Kingdom of God to be fully revealed in a very short time, and then everything would be resolved. It is less difficult to defer to the coming judgment and vengeance of God, as Paul advises, if one expects that judgment to be coming immediately. If one expects that unjust oppressors will soon be destroyed by God, there is no need to rebel and take up arms against them.

What about when Christians actually do have the power to enact changes in society, and the possibility of responding to their enemies violently is actually a feasible one? With the Constantinian revolution, the situation for Christians changed dramatically, and the need arose for new interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount. St. Augustine was one of the first and most important theologians to respond to this new task, and he did so in a time when there was a real threat from enemies—the barbarians just beyond the borders of the empire. He did so by developing a doctrine of just war—something of a compromise between the New Testament's presumption against violence and the responsibility of a political leader to protect one's citizens from unjust aggressors. Yet it is unclear how just war theory can be compatible with the commandment to love one's enemies. Augustine attempted to harmonize them by explaining that the love of enemy command (as well as the commandment to not resist an evildoer) refers to an inner disposition, and not outward actions. These teachings of Jesus, he explains, "ought always to be retained in the habitual discipline of the heart, and the benevolence which prevents the recompensing of evil for evil must be always fully cherished in the disposition."¹⁴ Yet he clearly sees this inner disposition as compatible with punishing a criminal or killing someone in war, as long as these actions are carried out with the motive of *caritas*. Thus, *caritas* toward those who are innocent or in need of protection

14. Letter 138.14, in Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. I (New York: Scribner, 1886).

requires one to carry out concrete activities such as waging a just war, but *caritas* towards the enemy requires only the cultivation of an inner disposition and has no such clear outworking. Such an interpretation reveals the level of complexity that arises when Christians begin to have an increasing number of choices about how to treat their enemies, and obedience to the commandment to love them seems to contradict other duties.

Some Modern Interpretations of the Commandment and its Relevance to New Political Situations

In interpreting the biblical teaching on love of enemies, it is important to observe its context within the theology of the New Testament and the Sermon on the Mount in particular.¹⁵ Interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount has long been a topic of debate, but there is a general consensus that it ought to be understood as a proclamation of a new ethic for the imminent Kingdom of God. Jesus' message of "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt. 4:17) is a call to participation in this new Kingdom. This will be a Kingdom of peace where the meek and the poor are lifted up. Yet in order to participate in this Kingdom, one must undergo a conversion to a new way of life specified in the Sermon on the Mount. Love of enemies is one characteristic of this new, perfect way of life.

Yet the Kingdom of God, though it has "come near," is not yet fully present. The essential problem is how to live out this radical ethic of the Kingdom (which includes loving one's enemies) and yet cope with a world which is still marked by sin and in which much depends upon the distinction between enemy and friend. Exegetes tend to lean one way or another: either the Kingdom *is* already present and actual, and thus we *should* adopt this ethic fully, or we can only have the faintest glimpse of the Kingdom which remains to be fulfilled in the future, and in the meantime we have to adopt an attitude of compromise and realism while living in this sinful world. Interpreting the theology of the Sermon on the Mount has become particularly problematic in situations where Christians are part of political structures. In seeking to live out its challenging ethic, it is not easy to reconcile the radical call to Christian discipleship with the practical problems of public responsibility.

The difficulty of applying this commandment in his own day was well described by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a sermon, when he spoke as follows:

The question of the relation of the Christian to enemies or how the Christians' enemies are to be overcome becomes repeatedly of highest importance for the individual and for the Christian community. Precisely here we are so completely

15. For a helpful discussion, see Lisa Cahill, *Love Your Enemies: Discipleship, Pacifism, and Just War Theory* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

without understanding, and, left to ourselves, our ideas are so totally perverted that our text [Rom. 12:17-21] begins: "Don't consider yourselves clever."¹⁶

In response to this difficulty of interpretation, a common response has generally been to limit the import of this commandment in various ways in order to adapt it to broader social and political life. As we have seen, Augustine circumscribed its sphere of application so that it only included the inner life of the person. Some modern interpreters circumscribe its sphere of application to particular kind of relationships—that is, to include only personal and not political ones. We are to love our enemies *within* our own little community. For instance, Richard Horsley believes that these commandments pertain mostly to the "squabbles of local life," and not to international conflicts. For him, the love of enemies command is primarily a call for economic solidarity in response to exploitation by the upper classes.¹⁷ Luise Schottroff also limits the command to a particular situation of exploitation. In her exegesis, loving one's enemies essentially means proclaiming to them the good news of the Gospel in order to convert them: "Loving one's enemy is the attempt to change the violent person into a child of God through a confrontation with the love of God. That is, love of one's enemy can be concretely presented as the prophetic proclamation of the approaching sovereignty of God."¹⁸ Thus, the enemy is an outsider, rather than a fellow-insider as Horsley suggested. But again, the commandment is interpreted only to apply in strictly analogous situations; Schottroff explains that "Matthew 5:38–48 is applicable when one is faced with the unjust power of those in a position of power; the just power of sovereigns is unknown in the Gospel of Matthew."¹⁹ With interpretations like these, one is left wondering if this commandment simply becomes inconsequential if the situation is completely different. Furthermore, limiting its import to a particular group or particular type of enemy contradicts the very spirit of the commandment which, as we have seen, is rooted in the *all*-encompassing love of God. Limiting the scope of love of enemy is like limiting the category "neighbor"—a limit which Jesus subverted.

Another interpreter, Reinhold Niebuhr, adopts a rather different interpretive tactic. He regards the Kingdom of God as rather far-off and thus sees a literal reading of the Sermon of the Mount as overly idealistic for the modern world. No doubt Niebuhr was strongly affected by the events of World War II and wanted to maintain the possibility of fighting a war like that against

16. Quoted in Klassen, "Love Your Enemies," 1.

17. Richard A. Horsley, "Ethics and Exegesis: 'Love Your Enemies' and the Doctrine of Nonviolence," in *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 91–92.

18. Schottroff, "Give to Caesar," 232.

19. *Ibid.*, 233.

Nazism. Thus, he maintains (like Augustine) that we can take this commandment seriously and seek to purge ourselves of rancor, but at the same time we may kill the enemy if they are evil. Loving one's enemy does not necessarily mean that the person will cease to be an enemy, and Christians should expect to find themselves in conflict, given the amount of evil present in the world. Yet conflict need not lead to hatred if one maintains the proper inner attitude:

there have been men in situations of conflict through all the ages who understood something of the difference between the evil that they oppose and the hapless and tragic individuals who are for the moment the embodiment of that evil. This distinction is possible even if the individuals, who are the instruments of the evil, have acquiesced in it.²⁰

Thus, one can even desire the good of the individual and yet wind up killing them in order to oppose the evil they are doing. William Klassen finds this interpretation to be a stretch:

Niebuhr is at great pains to convince his reader that love of enemies is no "psychological absurdity." It does demand "that we should desire the good of the enemy." If this is achieved, we will be purged of hatred... Bomber pilots are not to hesitate to partake of Communion before going on bombing raids, for the Eucharist is, after all, meant for sinners (p. 223)! One has to carry orders out without "rancor or self-righteousness." By a clever exegetical trick, Niebuhr can validate killing and bombing and ask only that it be done without hatred!²¹

Nevertheless, Klassen credits Niebuhr for seeking to wrestle with the commandment seriously, unlike other theologians of the World War II era who made such blatantly unbiblical statements as Heinrich Rendtorff's "the Christian is friendly toward his friends and courageous against his enemies."²² Still, the scriptural passages described above are concrete enough in their descriptions of the ways we are to love our enemy that it seems impossible to reduce this love to merely an inner attitude.

Another theologian of that era, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, provides a fascinating interpretive example. While in much of his writing Bonhoeffer goes to great lengths to emphasize the seriousness of the need to love one's enemies, the events of his own life suggest that he came to see the importance of killing his enemy, Hitler.²³ His book *The Cost of Discipleship* is particularly pertinent.

20. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. D. B. Robertson (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1976), 218.

21. William Klassen, "‘Love Your Enemies’: Some Reflections on the Current Status of Research." In *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 25 n. 10; citing Niebuhr, *Love and Justice*.

22. Cited by Klassen, "Love Your Enemies," 3.

23. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran theologian, was executed during the last days of World War II as punishment for his involvement in a plot to assassinate Hitler.

There, in tones reminiscent of some early church writers, he refers to the love of enemy as a key distinguishing mark of a Christian disciple. This is not merely applicable in private life; any kind of enemy of a Christian must be loved: "Be his enmity political or religious, he has nothing to expect from a follower of Jesus but unqualified love. In such love there is no inner discord between private person and official capacity. In both we are disciples of Christ or we are not Christians at all."²⁴ Bonhoeffer roots the love of enemies in the idea we have already seen to be present in Romans 5—the experience of God's love for us despite our enmity towards God. Recognizing his own sin, the disciple "can now perceive that even his enemy is the object of God's love, and that he stands like himself beneath the cross of Christ."²⁵

Such an interpretation clearly has political implications, and Bonhoeffer admits it: "This saying of Christ removes the Church from the sphere of politics and law. The Church is not to be a national community like the old Israel, but a community of believers without political or national ties."²⁶ In this statement one can see a clear critique of the supporters of the Reichskirche—those contemporaries of Bonhoeffer who wanted to establish a *German* church loyal to the Nazis. Yet even as he acknowledges the political implications of his position, Bonhoeffer seems simultaneously to step back from the radicality of his interpretation. In the same chapter in which he argues against any distinction between the personal and the political, Bonhoeffer admits that there is a place for secular political power—ordained by God—which does *not* follow such a radical ethical standard:

If we took the precept of non-resistance as an ethical blueprint for general application, we should indeed be indulging in idealistic dreams: we should be dreaming of a utopia with laws which the world would never obey. To make [such a teaching into] a principle for secular life is to deny God by undermining his gracious ordinance for the preservation of the world.²⁷

The result here is a kind of a tension or paradox between Bonhoeffer's call to radical discipleship and his acknowledgment that Jesus' commandments cannot simply be applied directly as an "ethical blueprint." Bonhoeffer is essentially acknowledging that while we are looking forward to the reality of the Kingdom of God, it is not completely here yet. While such an acknowledgment is vital, one must wonder exactly where Bonhoeffer stands. In the end, it seems that he may be left in a position not unlike that of Niebuhr's.

24. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 148.

25. *Ibid.*, 150.

26. *Ibid.*, 141.

27. *Ibid.*, 144.

A rather different interpretive scheme is provided by John Piper in his book on the love of enemies commandment. He staunchly maintains that this commandment was never meant to apply to some spheres of life, and even argues that obedience to the state—which is commanded in Romans 13, *necessarily* conflicts with the commandment to love one’s enemy. Not only does enemy-love not apply in the political realm, but often it *contradicts* the obedience to which Christians are bound. As scriptural warrant for this position, Piper points to the fact that “The command of enemy-love (which blesses its persecutors) is never made the norm for behavior in an institution where the command *upotassethe* [‘be subject’ or ‘obey’] is given,”—in other words, in the state between servants and masters, or between wives and husbands. Love is commanded among brothers and sisters and among neighbors, but not in institutions where obedience is necessary.

In Piper’s mind, the commandment to love our enemies is an idealistic ethic, capable of full realization only when the Kingdom of God becomes fully present. He does not, like Niebuhr, try to preserve it in a stunted form. Still, he acknowledges that even if it is an otherworldly ethic, it is sufficiently applicable today to create a certain tension with a more worldly ethic that is necessary in political life:

Alongside the command “Love your enemies!” (Matt. 5:44) stood the command “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s!” (Mk 12:17). The tension between the two commands is a reflex of the basic eschatological tension of the “already” and “not yet” of the Kingdom of God... The presence of the *new age* demands a radically new kind of behavior which draws its strength from the hidden, saving reign of God and is thus a sign of it—hence the demand for enemy-love. The continuing reality of the *present historical age* demands a recognition of and alignment with the fact that God is the sovereign of history who ordains its institutions for its good—hence the demand for subjection.²⁸

This explanation provides an elegant justification for Piper’s separation of the realms. Yet with this separation, Piper implies that enemy-love can never occur in the institutions of the “present historical age”—a claim which is too strong. Though the Kingdom is not completely here yet, it is present in a partial way, and *can* affect every sphere of life to *some* degree, at least.

Weighing the Interpretations, in the Age of the “War on Terrorism”

Given such a wide variety of recent interpretations of the commandment to love our enemies, how can we develop a Christian ethic that is faithful to the authority and integrity of the biblical text, yet acknowledges our own very different historical situation? Given that the Kingdom of God is not yet fully

28. Piper, *Love Your Enemies*, 133.

present, how can we live in the fullest possible expectation of it? A large number of interpreters have claimed that the commandment has very little political significance, since our political situation is so different. Yet it seems unwise to simply write off the commandment as "inapplicable" in large areas of Christian life. Bonhoeffer's argument for the unity of the Christian life is very convincing—we are the same people whether we are at home or on the job or in church or voting or even serving in the military. How, then, can this commandment be applied in all areas of our lives?

Interpreters like Piper are right to suggest that there are some times when this commandment cannot be directly applied in any kind of serious way. There may be times when other duties conflict with the duty to love our enemy. But even in these cases, the commandment of enemy-love should still be in our minds. Some ethicists suggest that when a *prima facie* duty has been overridden, it must continue to have a residual effect.²⁹ Such an attitude should be adopted towards this duty of enemy-love. While I would not want to limit enemy-love to merely a disposition, as Augustine tends to do, he is right that enemy-love as a disposition can be cultivated even when it is not possible to be put into direct action. We must still give it attention and respond to its challenge in *some* way at least. How can we do this? Some preliminary suggestions might include emphasizing (as Augustine did) that fighting a war is an activity to be done with grief and regret, rather than triumphalism or aggression. Also, we must regard our enemies with concern, particularly for their long-term future. Such concern is not incompatible with war; methods can be chosen that are effective yet do not make the task of rebuilding overly burdensome. Some goodwill towards enemies can be shown in the wake of war, as the Marshall plan showed dramatically. And the attempts to drop food to Afghanistan in the midst of bombing them during the war in 2002 are at least a good gesture. While they may have been a policy strategy more than anything else, they still provide a valid example of a possible way to consider the good of one's enemies even under dire circumstances.

Finally, the commandment to love our enemies should prevent us from committing two grave sins commonly associated with war. The first is the tendency to claim that God is on our side. The second is the tendency to dehumanize the enemy. In both of these sins, we deny our faith in a God whose love is so limitless that it extends even to our enemies. By commanding us to love our enemies, Jesus made clear that our enemies are never beyond the scope of God's concern. Furthermore, as humans, they are created in the image of God and so are worthy of some form of respect even when they are guilty of evil. And, as we have seen before, one of the reasons that we should

29. For instance, if one is hiding a Jew from the Nazis and is asked about it, the *prima facie* duty to always tell the truth may be overridden by the *prima facie* duty to preserve life. Nevertheless, in deceiving the Nazis, one should not lie more than is absolutely necessary.

love our enemies is that we, too, were once enemies of God. We must acknowledge in humility that we share the characteristics of evil and sinfulness that our enemies display. To the extent that dehumanizing our enemy leads us to believe that we are somehow morally superior in a basic way, it is a form of pride and even idolatry.

The commandment to love our enemies *is* broadly applicable, though subject to exceptions in grave circumstances. Yet even there, it reverberates. However, in arguing this, I do not wish to offer support to Niebuhr's idea that it is possible to continue to love our enemies under *any* circumstances, even when we are killing them. Niebuhr wants us to think that fighting a war against our enemies is actually a way of loving them. While just war theory would support the idea that killing our enemy during a war may be a morally good thing, it seems disingenuous to maintain that it is still a method of loving them. Perhaps killing the person may prevent a greater evil that they might do, if they were allowed to go on living. Yet killing them is still tragic. Though it may be the lesser of two evils, it is still an evil. It is not one of many ways to love one's enemy, but rather the grieved admission that it is no longer possible to love that enemy right now.

Some Christian Responses to a Contemporary Enemy

The terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001 provide an interesting case study for the response of Christians to an enemy. Forrest Church's collection of sermons preached in the immediate aftermath reveals a variety of responses to the "enemy" that had committed such shocking deeds. Because these sermons were preached within a week after the attacks, many of them in the New York area, they can be viewed more or less as an immediate "gut reaction." Thus, they can be regarded as a good measure of whether some contemporary Christians are paying attention to the commandment to love their enemies even in circumstances of crisis—a time when it is most difficult psychologically to do so. And the facelessness of the enemy in this situation provides a particular challenge (at that point, the U.S. government had not yet identified Al-Qaeda as the perpetrators). On the other hand, it could be argued that there is another factor which actually makes it easier for these writers to speak about loving one's enemy: given President George Bush's bellicose response and warlike language, people in America could fully expect that their government would seek out and punish the enemies. When one can trust that such punishment will occur—whether or not one agrees with it—this disarms the enemy in one's mind, and makes it slightly easier to work on loving them. In a way, this could allow some Christians to maintain a pacifist stance while at the same time being relieved on some level that Bush was taking action.

This last factor—the expectation of punishment—figures largely in one particular sermon by Richard Land. His is one of the few sermons which explicitly cites the commandment to love one's enemies, and also includes the commandment to turn the other cheek. Then he goes on to explain:

Now this is hard. We do not have the right to hate these terrorists. God loved them. God sent Jesus to die for them. No matter how twisted, no matter how perverted by hate and vengeance they have become, we lower ourselves to their level if we harbor hatred and animosity in our hearts toward them as individuals.³⁰

Land goes even further, demonstrating his own love for his enemies by trying to imagine sympathetically the ways in which those enemies may also have been victimized and "warped" by their leaders. Yet then he emphasizes that "we have the right to expect the government to exact justice on the perpetrators of these crimes. When Jesus talks about turning the other cheek, He is talking about us individually."³¹ This return to the separation of the personal and the political makes the things he has just said about not hating the terrorists seem somewhat irrelevant to the situation at hand. He also seems to treat the perpetrators as criminals to be punished—ignoring the fact that the U.S. government was actually treating the situation as a war, not a crime.

For many of these preachers, it seems to be difficult to allow the love of enemies to have any effect beyond the personal, given the perceived need to respond strongly against the terrorists. Many do not even mention love of enemies, although the majority do say something about the need to be in solidarity with Muslims—but they say this essentially because the vast majority of Muslims are *not* the real enemy. Even those who strongly caution against vengefulness do not necessarily mention love. For instance, R. Scott Colglazier writes that "We must understand, now more than ever, the difference between vengeance and justice... and we must understand that we don't fight hate with hate. We fight hate with understanding and reason and justice."³² The absence of the word "love" in that last sentence is striking.

One can almost see in these sermons the monumental struggle that even the preachers themselves are undergoing, as they attempt to call their people to obey a higher standard, and at the same time want to assuage the grief and outrage and desire for vengeance. In one woman's sermon, we can see her go back and forth between all of these emotions—she is furiously angry and yet knows that she needs to let the biblical teaching keep her from vengefulness. The Rev. Joanna Adams says,

30. Forrest Church, ed., *Restoring Faith: America's Religious Leaders Answer Terror with Hope* (New York: Walker & Co., 2001), 82.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*, 16.

In the weeks ahead our nation is going to need our prayers for moral guidance as never before. We cannot allow the attacks of this past week to go unanswered. Justice demands a strong response, but we must not let a spirit of vengeance get the best of us, so that we ourselves betray the great values upon which this country was founded. We must struggle against terrorism with all our wisdom and all our might, but we must never engage in cruel acts of retribution or be motivated by hatred, even toward those who have done evil against us. I wish I didn't even have to say that to you today—I am as angry as you are—but the Gospel says it to us all. This is the hardest part. “Love your enemies, pray for those that persecute you.”³³

There is clearly a very human struggle going on here, and while Adams has trouble knowing exactly how to carry out this commandment, she clearly knows enough to emphasize the need for prayers for moral guidance.

Adams' efforts are all the more interesting since other preachers do not seem to struggle to apply the love of enemies at all. Forrest Church, the editor of the volume, says that “Even as Churchill not Chamberlin answered the threat of Hitler, we must unite to respond to this new threat with force not appeasement.”³⁴ In addition, he says that “as a nation we shall be known by the steadiness of our resolve in leading the war against the perpetrators and sponsors of terrorism all around the globe”—a far cry from “they will know we are Christians by our love.”³⁵ He also describes it as a war between “civilization and anarchy,” and while he does caution against vengefulness, his language makes it clear that he is demonizing the terrorists and identifying the struggle against them with the very struggle against evil and anarchy in the universe. This is a long way from the trust in the justice of God which is such a crucial part of loving one's enemies. Others, such as Colglazier, take a somewhat similar attitude. He writes that “God can be found in the face of our suffering nation,” a clear statement that God is on our side, and he calls for prayers for the dead, the rescuers and the government, but never mentions the enemies.³⁶

Several other preachers, however, display a remarkable ability to honor and apply the commandment to love our enemies, even in the midst of this crisis. Paul Gonyea, a former military pilot, is particularly noteworthy. He writes, “Let's face it: Either these spiritual truths we claim to believe work all the time, or they don't work at all. When Jesus said, ‘Forgive your enemies,’ *these* are the kind of people he was talking about, not just some guy who cut you off in traffic.” Gonyea also explains that this means that we must avoid saying that God is on our side: “If we believe that God is on our side instead of theirs, we are making the same mistake as the people who carried out this attack. God

33. *Ibid.*, 71.

34. *Ibid.*, 22.

35. *Ibid.*, 19.

36. *Ibid.*, 14.

isn't on anybody's side; as a matter of fact, we're all supposed to be on God's side."³⁷ In light of this, then, we must humbly examine our own hearts to see the sin and enmity within them. And Gonyea indeed issues a call for this: "all of us have played a part in creating a world where this can happen... This isn't about who we blame; it's about how we heal. And the place we need to start is in our own heart."³⁸

Jon P. Gunnemann, a theologian at Emory University, strikes a similar tone to Gonyea, though with slightly more theological subtlety. He begins by critiquing President Bush's response (a response which also resonated deeply in the public consciousness) as being basically antithetical to Christianity. Bush had explained, in a remarkably Manichaean tone, that "We are engaged in a 'monumental struggle between good and evil' and make no mistake about it, 'good will win.'"³⁹ In Gunnemann's opinion,

That is cosmology, and comes close to a neat reversal and mimicry of the demonizing mentality that flew those planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. As Christians and as those called to be theologians for the church, we have other language and texts to command our loyalty, to shape our interpretations, to resist demonization, and to form the impulses of our hearts. Some of these we know well enough to recite from memory: Love your enemies, Do good to those who persecute you...⁴⁰

This is a beautiful statement of what it means to think as a Christian, and to stand against the natural tendency to hate our enemies. Gunnemann goes on to explain that Christians' proper response to the terrorist attacks is a careful, humble self-examination. This will require asking tough questions about America's role in the world, questions which have no easy answers—

But the very asking of them might at least save us from becoming like those who have injured us, and might lead us to genuine acts of repentance. Asking them might create a proper humility in the interpretation of September 11, even while we genuinely grieve, and it might help in discovering proportionate ways to respond in achieving the genuine security we need.⁴¹

A few other preachers also speak of the need for self-examination, and some also link it to the need to imitate God. As we have seen, the commandment to love one's enemies is grounded in faith in a God who loves God's own enemies (even those who crucified him), and so we are to love our enemies in order to imitate that God. Episcopal Bishop Frank Griswold explains that our task of self-examination should lead to a new commitment to compassion and

37. Ibid., 98.

38. Ibid., 102.

39. Ibid., 87.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid., 91–92.

justness. We need to develop compassion for all people, “so that our compassion, our just-ness are revelatory of the One who, from the cross, draws the world, all people and all things, to himself, in his loving embrace.”⁴² Brenda Husson also speaks beautifully about imitating God’s loving embrace of God’s enemies, when she says that “We become God’s prayer and show forth God’s image when we hold onto the people we know. When we hold onto the people we don’t. When we hold on even to our enemies. God holds us all that we might all know his saving embrace.”⁴³

Finally, the most moving sermon in Church’s book is certainly the one preached by a Catholic priest who had just lost his younger brother in the World Trade Center. He speaks against revenge, and in favor of a justice which is justice for the entire human community and not just one-sided justice. Finally he pleads with the congregation,

If you have an American flag outside your house, if you wear an American flag, wear it and display it with pride. But not pride in guns, not pride in bombs or high-tech weapons of revenge. Let it be a source of pride that we can be a people who respond with love, compassion, and healing to end the evil, not only in the terrorists, but the evil and the darkness that exists in every one of us, male and female, young and old.⁴⁴

Our power, he says, “is not in guns or high-tech weapons or military forces. It is in the extravagant love of God.”

Conclusion

These sermons in a time of crisis reveal the human difficulties that we have in understanding how to love our enemies, difficulties that Bonhoeffer spoke about a number of years ago. How can we love our enemies and at the same time stand against the evil that they may represent? This commandment to love them provides a caution, a reminder that things may not be as simple as they seem, that our nature and our fate are more deeply linked with those of our enemies than we would like to acknowledge. Loving our enemies forces us to take seriously and bring into the light the evil and enmity within our own selves. There is an old adage that says “Choose your enemies carefully because you will become like them.” By loving one’s enemies, it is possible to disarm that tendency. And perhaps the most important thing this commandment can teach us is that the real enemy is not any human person or group, but rather *enmity itself*.⁴⁵

42. Ibid., 156.

43. Ibid., 114.

44. Ibid., 51.

45. In light of this commandment, one might want to argue that the real problem in the

The post-September 11 preachers who bring the implications of enemy-love into their sermons show that there are ways to apply this commandment even in situations where the enemy seems exceptionally evil and destructive. The love of enemies is a commandment of Christ that we must apply in a world of great tension between the already and the not-yet—but it must never be regarded as irrelevant, however. This commandment has long been central to the Gospel and to Christian identity, even in very different contexts. It will always be a struggle to apply it, and yet it is a struggle that must never be abandoned.

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