



August 13, 2010

Loving our Enemies to Death?

When compelled to respond to injustice, love is not blind to justice. Because an evil act damages some particular good, love, *because* it is love, will hate both the act and the damage. Thus, clear-sighted love, even in the midst of forgiveness, must requite injustice with some measure of retribution. Just retribution may range in form from a simple expression of resentment, to restraint, to punishment.

How, then, does love act in the international arena? Responding to injustice between nations through restraint and punishment may demand the killing of our adversary in war. There are four basic positions to consider: pacifism, which insists that all war is wrong; realism, which sees war as self-interest, and considers moral reasoning within war as pointless; ideological war, in which the ideals of a “faith”—religious or secular—authorize the slaughter of the non-believer; or the just war, which teaches the prudential application of universal moral criteria within a specific historical moment. There is good reason to believe that the just war wins the field for love. Admittedly, this conclusion is a bit of a cheat as just war retains (and corrects) the best of pacifism and realism. Nevertheless, the salient point is this: love has no choice but to protect innocence, peace, justice, and order from aggression; and the employment of lethal force is sometimes the only remedy. Thus, killing is occasionally the manifestation of love in the last resort.

There is a steadily declining certainty in America—even (or especially) within Christian communities—that the taking of a human life is compatible with love. Increasingly love seems characterized by a maudlin benignity that sanitizes it of anything we find uncomfortable; including the necessity of love to stand in judgment. But Paul, in his letter to the Roman church, reminds us that true love carries a double-mandate: a profound abhorrence of evil and an unfathomable devotion to goodness. This will require that we jettison the notion that love is merely benevolence—the advancing of another’s well-being through kindness and a desire to see them happy. In-

stead, love wills the *good* of the other and is willing to cause suffering and unhappiness if these are the only means to achieve this good.

Considered through this lens, enemy-love requires our interest in seeing our enemy restrained from the performance of evil, not only for the sake of defending the victim, but because we know that the doing of evil is not good for the enemy. Truly, authentically, *not* good for him. And clear-sighted love hates evil’s assault on goodness. Augustine reminds us that, “Just as it is not an act of kindness to help a man, when the effect is to make him lose a greater good, so it is not a blameless act to spare a man, when by doing so you let him fall into greater sin.”

That this seems outrageous to many suggests that American Christians are forgetting that one of the primary functions of politics is to serve as a postlapsarian remedy for sin. A principle motivation for Christian involvement in political life is to restrain evil, prevent the worst, do no harm, and to help where we can. Said in another way: too many no longer genuinely believe evil is something to be resisted and overcome within history. Granted, evil will not be overcome until the end of time—but we must eliminate particular evils and diminish others, even now.

I am often asked how a Christian can sanction violence against one made in the *imago Dei*? But the real question is what do you do when one *imago Dei* is kicking in the face of another *imago Dei*? Rarely is the choice between violence and non-violence. More often it is about upon whom violence is going to be employed—the aggressor or his would-be victims. Mercy always costs somebody something—to show mercy to our enemy will often mean our neighbor foots the bill. Given our obligation to approximate justice, I venture to guess that on most occasions allowing this would not be a show of mercy at all but rather a radical dereliction of duty.

—Marc LiVecche is a PhD student in *the Divinity School at the University of Chicago*.