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# forgiveness

*Following Jesus into Radical Loving*

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*Forgiveness: Following Jesus into Radical Loving*

2008 First Printing

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## *introduction*

**F**OR MANY YEARS, my younger brother, now one of my favorite people, was my nemesis. No matter how our battles started—and they were physical and fierce—when it came time for the parental judgment call, I was invariably found to be at fault. This, I thought, was grossly unfair. No matter that I was four years older. From my perspective, he was the privileged male child, exempt from scullery duty and paid—paid!—to mow the lawn, a job I passionately, irrationally, coveted. Plus, he was a tease, a conniving little beast who knew every weak and rotted plank in my character and purposely slammed his high-top Keds (I was jealous of them, too) down hard

whenever he saw the opportunity. I blamed him for my having to serve time in the corner while the happy shrieks of the neighborhood kids drifted through the window like the life that was passing me by. I was convinced (completely wrongly, of course) that my mother loved him more than she loved me, and this precipitated clumsy, frantic efforts on my part to gain her attention. But no matter how I slaved for As at school or tried to impress her with my writing skills, I could not seem to pry his grubby little fingers off her heart.

However, one rainy afternoon all this changed. We kids were restless and bored and the situation was degenerating rapidly. I could see that look in his eye; he was plotting, I was sure of it, and soon full-blown teasing would erupt. And then I would hit him, and I would be in the corner again, and he would spend the rest of his day darting smirkingly past me in my invisible cell. But somehow, our sister saved us; she plopped a record on the turntable and started to hum and spin. Though neither my brother nor I can put a finger on what happened next—no words were exchanged, or at least none that we can

remember—we suddenly found ourselves locked in one another's arms, slow dancing to "String of Pearls." I was twelve, he was eight, and not since he was a baby in his basinet (my baby, I'd thought of him then) had I adored him so honestly and purely: so protectively.

In a twinkling, we'd been released from mutual hostility, from blaming and recrimination, from smoldering jealousy and wishing ill upon the other. What was left after the sudden vaporization of habitual negativity was nothing short of miraculous: a delicate, courteous loving-kindness toward one another that—despite a few setbacks when we were in our teens—has characterized our relationship ever since.

What we two had experienced, all unsuspecting, was grace. Though we were far too young to analyze what had gone wrong between us or who was to blame for it, and though we were still too immature to offer an apology to one another, deep inside we yearned for peace. That honest longing was all it took; God filled in the gaps for us, the gaps we were too young to negotiate on our own.

Only now do I understand what a remarkable gift that sudden, unexpected reconciliation represented. Most of the time, forgiveness is not this unthinking or instantaneous. Instead, it is more often a complex, painful process, fraught as any novel with disappointments and reversals. “Forgiveness is the final form of love,” says theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, but lest we mistakenly assume that because we love, we are natural-born forgivers, Gandhi adds this caution: “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong.” Both of these twentieth-century social activists worked tirelessly for justice and human dignity. Neither of them doubted the reality of evil, much less took it lightly. Yet both believed that at the core of meaningful existence lies the terribly difficult task of forgiveness.

Why is forgiving such a challenge? From whichever perspective we approach it—whether we are trying to forgive someone who has hurt us, or are in dire need of forgiveness ourselves—when we enter into the process, we find ourselves laid bare. The intense searchlight of mercy

invades our every hiding place. We cannot go through being stripped of false dignity and self-justifying excuses without being changed. Transformation is unavoidable, for our blind eyes have been opened and now we see.

In my own case, it was a vengeful dream in my late thirties that transformed me. A self-absorbed and unstable person was making my life miserable by spreading malicious gossip. I was becoming a little crazy over the whole situation. All I could think of was how to stop the onslaught of hateful words. My anger was understandable—even justifiable. Until I dreamed of murder, however, I had no idea of how dangerous it is to nurture rage. I was shocked at myself. I had always thought I was a good and decent person, an enlightened being who worked for justice and peace. This level of killing anger did not fit into my view of myself.

I was also shaken by another realization. It appeared that there was an ironic aspect to forgiveness—that we often bear more animosity toward someone we have harmed than toward someone who has harmed us. As Quaker Jessamyn

West points out, it's easier to forgive others for the mistakes they make than for their witnessing our own, and this was certainly true in the case of my dream. The person who was tormenting me, the person I visualized shooting, was someone who had once admired me and wanted to be my friend. Though I was shocked by this realization and what it revealed about me, I had little idea of what to do about it now. At some level, I understood that taking its implications seriously would precipitate a major change in the way I saw the world, and this prospect was frightening. Despite my hidden shame, I preferred to keep things as they were; life was familiar this way, and I was comfortable with it.

Eventually, however, God reintroduced the issue. I was driving on a lonely stretch of the California coastal highway north of Santa Barbara, when suddenly, something barely visible in the deepening twilight began to materialize on the roadside ahead. I slowed to see better: it was a man dragging a large wooden cross, mounted on what looked like roller skate wheels.

I gaped at him for a moment, then flashed on by. Though I looked for him in my rearview mirror, he'd already been erased by the falling darkness. As it turned out—it was in the paper next day—I'd seen a real man on a real pilgrimage heading up the coast of California, but that didn't diminish the eerie quality of the experience. The vision of myself as a heartless murderer seemed somehow linked to that dreamlike Christ figure struggling on through the twilight.

When, some time later, I felt myself being inexorably turned by God in a whole new direction, the same two images rose before me like a pair of somber icons, gleaming with mysterious significance in the light of my new faith. On one hand was self-styled payback, so ugly but so satisfying, and on the other was perfect love, the kind that could finally heal my angry, wounded, guilty heart.

Though I was sincerely appalled at the violent emotions revealed by my dream, it was only after my reconversion to Christianity that I began

to question my automatically hostile responses to other people's hostility. I couldn't get away with "doing what comes naturally" any longer. Becoming a follower of Christ requires that we give up what feels normal and enter uncharted and mysterious new territory. Christ requires a radical change of direction, and he models a way of being in the world that often brings us into shocking conflict with our notions about what it means to be a decent human being.

One of Jesus' most mind-boggling declarations, repeated throughout the Gospels, is that we who hope to follow him must first be willing to forgive the people who have hurt us. Not only does this injunction show up at the heart of the prayer he offers to his disciples ("Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors") but he restates it as a requirement for salvation: "If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions" (Mt. 6:11–15).

He also tells us that if we wish to live in relationship with God, we must first seek forgiveness from those we've hurt: "Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Mt. 5:23–24). Our damaged relationships with other people, especially when we are responsible for that damage, have a direct effect on our friendship with God. We cannot pray with any kind of integrity while blithely ignoring the fact that we've wounded another person. Jesus tells us that we must first take care of business—make amends and do our best to reconcile—before we approach our Father in heaven.

By the time God tracked me down in the wilderness, I'd been wandering alone for years and was more than ready to come home. Yet something kept holding me back. It was only when I began to reexamine my hidden hostility toward anyone who crossed me that I saw what it might be: my refusal to forgive

was an unmistakable sign I was not yet ready to obey God. And if I could not, for love of him, give up my own will when it came to grudges, then who was I kidding? I might “believe” in an intellectual sense, but that was a dangerous illusion. To truly believe in God without loving him, as Jesuit Marko Rupnik points out, is impossible.<sup>1</sup>

Why is it so difficult to forgive? What is it about being forgiven that secretly galls us? Why couldn't I admit how much guilt lay concealed beneath my coldness toward a longtime friend? *Forgiveness: Following Jesus into Radical Loving* has evolved out of my attempt to answer these questions. Since I was only able to start seeking and offering forgiveness when I started to take Christianity seriously, I have confined myself to that viewpoint throughout these pages. But there is a more important reason I've chosen to talk about forgiveness from the Christian perspective: I've slowly become convinced that the centrality of forgiveness in Christianity is unique among the great religions and philosophies of the world, peace-loving Buddhists included.

Why? No other religion came into being through an act of forgiveness. Without God's merciful and forgiving love toward his creatures, there would have been no Incarnation, and thus, no Christianity at all. Christ became man in order to rescue us from the ravages of sin and restore us to spiritual health. The success of his ongoing redemptive project, which is to be carried out by his children on Earth, depends before anything else upon our realizing that we are in serious need of forgiveness.

As Christ puts it, "Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. Go and learn the meaning of the words, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' I did not come to call the righteous but sinners" (Mt. 9:12–13). His mission is to make whole what has been fragmented, damaged, or destroyed through the depredations of evil. Yet only we who are willing to acknowledge our own spiritual illness are open to this kind of healing.

In other words, we must first undergo redemption ourselves—a redemption that begins with the experience of being forgiven—before we are ready to join in Christ's work of

reclaiming what has been lost to sin, death, and the power of the devil. Only then can we become participants in the great project of transforming evil into good.

*Father forgive*

On a moonlit night in 1940, at the height of World War II, 450 German bombers dropped five hundred tons of high explosives and forty thousand fire bombs on a single British city. Over fourteen hundred people in Coventry were woefully injured or killed. Among the many buildings hit during the massive attack was the graceful St. Michael's Cathedral, founded in the twelfth century and rebuilt beginning in 1373. At the end of the Luftwaffe raid, which lasted eleven hours, only the outer walls and spire of the eight-hundred-year-old church remained standing.

While a stonemason was picking through the smoking debris of the church the next morning, he found two blackened oak beams

lying across one another in the rough shape of a cross; he tied them together and set them in a barrel. A priest fashioned a second cross from three medieval nails. These two crosses would eventually become international symbols of reconciliation. But before that could happen, the people of Coventry would have to deal with the fact that their lives had been changed forever. Not only had they lost friends and relatives in this unprecedented attack—the first in history launched with the goal of destroying a whole city in a single air raid—but in many cases they had also lost their homes, their sources of livelihood, and their hope for the future. Before they could even think of forgiveness, the people of Coventry would have to deal with their terrible grief and rage.

In the days following the bombing, the cathedral provost helped point the survivors away from their completely justifiable urge for retaliation and toward the ideal of loving the enemies who had destroyed their way of life. He mounted the stonemason's cross of beams above the charred altar and had two words carved

into the red sandstone behind it: FATHER FORGIVE. Though his message of forgiveness was particularly controversial during this time of all-out war, his steadfast insistence on following Christ through the valley of grief and rage created an opening in Coventry for eventual healing and reconciliation.

When the cathedral was finally rebuilt, the new building was placed so as to face the ruins, the cross of beams, and the carved sign. The cross of medieval nails was placed on the altar inside the new modern church, one wall of which was a seventy-foot-high glass screen. When I stood inside that church a few years ago and looked out toward the grassy ruins, it took a moment to realize what I was seeing, faintly etched into the soaring glass that divides the new from the old. Superimposed against the sky, hovering over the bombed out cathedral, great flocks of angels, apostles, and prophets raised their hands toward heaven.

When Christ tells us we must take forgiveness seriously, he also promises to accompany us. We do not seek or offer forgiveness on our own; we

cannot. It is only through him that we are able. Our role in forgiveness is far humbler than his. We are to bear the burden of our recalcitrant selves, slowly learning to shed the mass of fear and self-concern that blocks his work in us.



*part 1*  
before we can forgive  
*intellectual impediments to forgiving*



*one* forgiveness and  
the problem of evil

I WAS SEVENTEEN before I experienced my first real doubt about God's existence. It did not come out of thin air. It was the summer of 1969, and I was living in the back room of an Alliance for Progress clinic in the mountains of Honduras with another girl my age. We were Amigos de las Americas volunteers, and our job was to inoculate as many people as we could against smallpox, tetanus, mumps, measles, and diphtheria. In the short time we'd been there, I'd already been brought face to face with more physical affliction than I'd seen during my entire life, and the magnitude of suffering was starting to give me nightmares.

Then, one morning, as Sue and I were standing at the examination table unwrapping needles we had sterilized in the pressure cooker the night before, someone began knocking on the heavy wooden door of the clinic. We were used to people coming by at all hours to ask for vitamins, cough medicine, and aspirin, and our inclination that morning was to pretend we hadn't heard—after all, we'd be opening up in less than twenty minutes, and whoever it was could certainly wait till then. Then the person at the door began to wail.

I went to the window and pushed open the wooden shutters. A woman stood on the front steps, a dirty towel over her head and a bundle of rags in her arms. The moment she saw me looking down at her, she went silent. But she stared back at me with fierce concentration, as though I were a doctor—as though I knew what to do.

“Open the door, Sue,” I said. “I think it’s a baby.”

Inside the foul mound of rags lay a wizened little creature who turned out to be a girl. I

couldn't tell her age. She looked far older than a newborn, though she couldn't have weighed more than seven or eight pounds and her skeletal limbs were wrinkled with dehydration. The mother was murmuring in Spanish, explaining that this child had dysentery and was very hot, couldn't eat, couldn't suck, was clearly dying. She pointed to the half-open eyelids and the half-moons of white that gleamed beneath them.

Sue and I had some medical training and had been issued a good medical book besides, so we had some inkling about what we could try: we could mix sugar and salt with water and put it in a syringe for oral feedings every ten minutes. Maybe—who knew?—it would help. It certainly couldn't make things any worse. We prepared the first syringe, and Sue began dropping fluid into the baby's mouth.

Meanwhile, people were lining up for their shots on the dirt road outside the clinic. We put the woman and her daughter in a chair in the corner, and checked on them in between inoculations, making sure the oral feedings were taking place on schedule. By the time the

mother trudged off in the evening, her child's eyes were focusing. It had been an all-day vigil to save a baby whose odds of survival were already ridiculously low in this malnourished, poverty-stricken place. Sometime during those hours, doubt had started forming up in me.

Who was God, after all? If he was both all-good and all-powerful, as I'd always been taught, then why didn't he *do* something about this sad place? Did his apparent absence mean he didn't love us as much as we hoped? Or was he really not omnipotent after all, and simply incapable of coping with the world as it was?

I couldn't bear these thoughts—if I were going to believe in God, then I wanted him to be the one I knew from the Bible, the one who lovingly kept track of sparrows and cared about every hair on my head. In light of how unjust I was discovering the world to be, what possible good was an ineffectual, disconnected deity? Wouldn't it be better for us to simply tackle things ourselves, as we'd done with this dying baby?

My youthful protest at the apparent injustice of God soon hardened into a cynical agnosticism

that set my course for nearly twenty years. When, in the 1980s, villages like the one I'd lived in were systematically destroyed by government death squads in Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and southern Mexico, I kept thinking about that baby and all the children like her—the “throwaway” children who were quietly expiring by the thousands before they ever had a chance to live. My midlife reencounter with God, no matter how gratifying, did not immediately resolve these questions about injustice and evil. I still wanted some answers I could live with. How could you forgive evil and still fight for what was right?

*challenges to christian forgiveness*

Simon Wiesenthal, a Jewish concentration camp survivor who spent his life tracking down and identifying Nazi war criminals, writes about the uneasy relationship between evil and forgiveness in his book *The Sunflower*.<sup>1</sup> While still a prisoner, he was put on a work detail that takes him to a Red Cross hospital. There he was approached

by a nurse, who asked him to follow her to a room in which he found a dying SS soldier. The man wished to confess a terrible atrocity he committed under Nazi command—helping to pack a house with hundreds of Jewish men, women, and children, and then torching it. He desperately needed forgiveness, and he begged Wiesenthal to grant it to him.

Wiesenthal could not—but he spent the rest of his life in conflict over his decision. At the end of his book, he asks, what would you have done in my place? A number of famous contributors are invited to write essays in response. The majority agree: no forgiveness is possible in this case. Their primary reason for rejecting forgiveness as an option is a particularly powerful one, and has to do with fear of perpetuating evil. In order to prevent us from ever again going through a moral catastrophe on the scale of the Holocaust, they say, the blood of the innocent must continue to cry out forever. We must *never* forget—and forgiving assures that we will.

Only a handful of writers—all of them, with the exception of the Dalai Lama, are Christian—

see things differently. For them, forgiveness is not only appropriate, but an urgent necessity. Why? They agree that we must do everything we can to prevent another massive outbreak of evil on the scale of Hitler's genocide. But they disagree about how we best handle that threat. The radical Christian belief is that evil is only overcome when it is transformed into good. Much of the evil in the world will not be truly overcome, but the possibility exists that it *can* be, and we cannot afford to miss the opportunity when it presents itself. Forgiveness is a key aspect of this very mysterious and transformative process.

Yet even those of us who accept the Christian view go through a struggle when the crime seems particularly heinous. In the fall of 2006, the Old Order Amish of Nickel Mines in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, suffered a tragedy that momentarily rocked the nation. On a lovely fall day, a non-Amish neighbor of the community, Charles Roberts, drove to a nearby one-room schoolhouse, ordered all the boys and adults out of the classroom, nailed shut the doors and drew

the blinds, then tied up ten little Amish girls whom he planned to molest—in retaliation, as he put it in his suicide note, for God allowing his infant daughter to die years before. However, the police arrived almost immediately. Instead of carrying through with his plan, Roberts shot the girls execution style, and then turned the gun on himself.

Three girls died at the scene, and two others, both from the same family, passed away hours apart in separate hospitals. The five remaining victims were critically injured. The community, shocked and grief stricken, surrounded the bereft families with love and kindness. They also went to the widow and parents of the killer and offered their sympathy and support within hours of the shooting. They told the relatives of the man who had murdered their children that they forgave him and bore him no ill will. They made it clear that they wanted to continue their longtime neighborly relations with the family.<sup>2</sup>

Though the swiftness of the Nickel Mines Amish to forgive a man who had just executed their elementary school-age daughters was both

astonishing and admirable, for many people it was also deeply troubling.<sup>3</sup> Why?

One of our great modern legacies, for good or for ill, is a passionate devotion to the self. A beneficial side effect of this self-absorption has been a greater respect for individual life, and possibly even an increased capacity for empathy. Because we ourselves feel that we can demand respect simply by virtue of being alive, we are willing to extend that respect to other people. When we see human dignity being egregiously violated, we become outraged.

When the scale of violation is overwhelming, as in the Nickel Mines episode, or too monstrous to comprehend, as in the Holocaust, the Rwanda genocide, and the systematic destruction of villages in Central America during the 1980s, we are overwhelmed with sympathetic fury. We feel that to speak of forgiveness in such circumstances is to engage in the grossest kind of disrespect toward innocent victims. Forgiving the perpetrators of such evil means that we offer our sympathy to the very people who have been merciless toward others. What about the demands of justice in such circumstances?

*the requirement of truth*

Those who work on international truth and reconciliation commissions have a clear picture of the depth and range of evil in the world. Listening to story after story of cruel atrocities committed against often innocent people takes both courage and the hope that somehow, despite the horrors they have undergone or caused, victim and perpetrator can be reconciled and go on to live in peace. Interestingly, what victims often want from their oppressors before anything else is not so much a sign of repentance or apology, but the *truth*—no matter how grisly—of exactly what happened. They want to be released from the hell of perpetual wondering. The moment they hear this truth, no matter how it shatters them, is the moment that opens them to the possibility of forgiveness.

Thus, forgiveness cannot ever require that evil be overlooked, explained away, or excused; if it is, evil will certainly grow and flourish. An aspect of justice is that the truth be revealed; another aspect of justice that we often prefer to forget about, as

South African theologian Charles Villa-Vicencio points out, is that every perpetrator, no matter how savagely he behaves, is also a human being.<sup>4</sup> The Christian belief in original sin suggests that, given the right combination of circumstances, we are *all* capable of unspeakable deeds. When we turn perpetrators into monsters, we deny this common ground between us. According to Villa-Vicencio, it is unjust not to acknowledge this basic fact of our shared propensity for evil.

It is certainly true that some crimes against humanity are so unthinkable they can never be legally redressed. It is also true that some wounds never heal, especially those that occur after a sustained, deliberate attempt to strip us of our humanity. The philosopher Simone Weil says that cruelty on this scale can lead to a soul-killing condition she calls “affliction,” which is to be distinguished from simple suffering.<sup>5</sup>

Yet Christianity still insists that forgiveness can serve as an “outward and visible sign” of Christ’s redemptive presence. Even here, forgiveness can insure that evil does not have the last word.

*blaming God for evil*

Not everyone is convinced by Christianity's bold assertions, however. My teenaged anger toward God for his seeming injustice in Honduras was not only perfectly understandable, it is the main reason many people simply cannot believe, no matter how they try, in a good and all-powerful God who is intimately involved in the world. They feel we would do better to let go of our lofty theistic notions and get on with dealing with what is here.

The writer Albert Camus takes up this old argument in his 1947 novel *The Plague*. The protagonist, Dr. Bernard Rieux, lives in the Algerian city of Oran, where thousands of rats suddenly begin dying in the streets. He immediately suspects an outbreak of bubonic plague, though his suspicions are ignored by the authorities. Soon, however, people begin dropping dead, and the city is sealed off from the world. The story revolves around the characters' responses to an unexpected, catastrophic event. Opportunists figure out how to make money.

The local priest uses the epidemic to launch a moral diatribe against his lax parishioners. And Dr. Rieux works tirelessly to save whomever he can, despite the utter hopelessness of the situation and despite his already pronounced weariness with life. The work gives him no rewards whatsoever, but he doggedly continues to do it and thus wrings a kind of nobility out of a meaningless situation.

For many years, I chose the course laid out by Camus. I would work for good, I told myself, and forget about trying to please this nebulous thing called God. Instead of reading the Bible, I read the great atheistic existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre, who did not claim to know anything much at all, and certainly nothing about God, in whom he did not believe. He advised that we simply try to live “authentically” in a universe that—with all its tragedy and woes—could not but seem absurd to thinking, feeling creatures like us. Taking life on the concrete level, detached from any lofty attempts to make it more than it was, made sense to me.

Ironically enough, however, one of the main reasons I finally returned to Christianity was *because* of its robust stand against evil. As my own life grew increasingly complicated and filled with responsibilities to others—responsibilities I was often failing to meet—the existentialist refusal to recognize any moral givens wore exceedingly thin. Not only did it offer no way to become better, it could not even offer reasons to be good. But coming back to Christianity meant once more having to grapple with that old, frustrating question: why would a good God permit evil?

The answer I was taught in Lutheran Sunday school, usually referred to as the free will theory, asserts that God—desiring sons and daughters, not automatons—gave humans the ability to freely choose or reject him. St. Augustine, a proponent of this belief, says that the best possible universe will obviously contain free-willed, rational, moral beings—though this free will unfortunately means that some people may choose to embrace evil. Since God has allowed us to freely choose what we will do, however, it is not fair to blame him for the results.<sup>6</sup>

Theological explanations such as this one are called theodicies; they are attempts to justify and explain why God does what he does. The philosopher Alvin Plantinga, in his book *God, Freedom, and Evil*, analyzes a more modest argument, one he calls the free will defense. Instead of purporting to know what God's reasons for permitting evil *are*, we should say what they *might possibly be*.<sup>7</sup> And one thing we can suggest is that there might be some kind of good—one we cannot imagine—that even God cannot bring about without permitting evil.

A human analogy for this theological problem might be the dilemma in William Styron's famous novel, *Sophie's Choice*. Here, a Polish woman unfairly accused of collaborating against the Third Reich is arrested by the Gestapo and sent with her two young children to Auschwitz. At the gates she is confronted by a sadistic guard who offers her a deal. Both children are destined for the gas chamber, he explains, but he, in his kindness, will spare one of them. She has to choose which one that will be. Her wrenching decision, which leaves her with unbearable guilt

for the rest of her life, results in unintended and unwilling evil: the death of her beloved little girl. To save her daughter, however, would mean the death of her son. In this case, there is no way to do good without a corresponding evil result. God's decision to create human beings in his own image, with the freedom to either accept or reject his love, was a wonderfully good act that nevertheless opened up the possibility of evil in the world.

The free will defense is perhaps the most convincing explanation of the coexistence of God and evil. I must admit, however, that I, like most other non-philosophers, am not deeply moved by philosophical arguments, even powerful and impressive ones like Plantinga's. The problem of evil continued to impede my growth in faith, and it was only when I had to confront the results of my own self-centeredness—only when I looked into the mirror and recognized a great sinner—that the Christian story and its version of the relationship between God and evil started to make sense to me.

Christianity asserts that we are made to love God, and when we choose ourselves over him, we choose an anxious half-life that leaves us defenseless against opportunistic evil. Despite our stubborn resistance, God sends us a savior to help us out of this trap of our own making. However, instead of being grateful for the rescue attempt, we crucify him and go on in our self-absorbed way. Without Christ, however, not only are we incapable of loving God, we cannot possibly love one another on the scale required. It is easier to focus on our private lives and personal relationships and let the rest go. The resulting indifference to our fellow human beings is the real cause of most suffering in the world.

I did not want to face this fact, not as an idealistic young teenager and not as a perpetually outraged adult activist. I wanted to blame someone at the top for the misery and distress that seemed to characterize most human lives. Yet what I was seeing when I looked into the cloudy eyes of that woefully dehydrated baby was the natural result of millennia of human sinning.

On the subject of our neglected neighbors, Christ is characteristically blunt. Despite what we profess to believe, without loving actions toward one another, we cannot qualify as his true followers. As Jesus' own Jewish tradition would put it, we are to be God's hands and feet in the world, and if we don't do the work he puts before us, who will? He tells us that what we do for the least of our brothers, we do for him. He explains that when we feed the hungry, extend hospitality to the homeless, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit those in prison, we show him love at the same time. And when we turn our faces away from those who are hurting or in need, we turn our faces from him, too. (Mt. 25:31–45).

With these words, Jesus calls us to something more than simply resisting sin. He calls us to succor the victims of evil, both the moral evil so obviously caused by human beings and what is often referred to as “natural evil”—the catastrophes unleashed by earthquakes, floods, droughts, and disease—the effects of which are so often compounded by human wrongdoing