

Does Justice Rob Mercy? Retribution, Punishment, and Loving Our Enemies

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I HAVE ALWAYS LOVED THE PARABLES and teachings of Jesus about forgiveness and mercy, and I have pondered their meaning for many years. We could say that in these parables, parables such as the Prodigal Son, the Lost Sheep, and the Laborers in the Vineyard, mercy and forgiveness are given pre-eminence over justice. One would think that we would simply rejoice in the message of God's love, mercy, and forgiveness that these parables present. But they trouble us. When the parable of the Prodigal Son is discussed in a Mormon Sunday School class, the Older Brother is invariably brought up as the better son, the preferred son. The Younger Brother is forgiven and loved, it is conceded, but the Older Brother has the higher place in the Kingdom of God, it is argued. For most Mormons, justice and obedience are more important than mercy and forgiveness. The Older Brother was obedient. Yes, he should have forgiven his brother, but didn't the Father tell him, "All that I have is thine?" Most Mormons I have heard on the subject interpret this to mean that the Older Brother will inherit the highest kingdom of heaven while the Younger Brother will take a lower place. So in this interpretation of the Prodigal Son, mercy is inferior to justice.

We are troubled by the words Jesus gives after telling the parable of the Lost Sheep. He says, "I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance" (Luke 15:7). Does Jesus love a sinner more than a righteous person? This couldn't be right, we think. And the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, in which the laborers who work one hour receive the same wages as those who work all day, causes much consternation. If everyone receives the same wage, why should we work so hard to obey the commandments? Why not simply enjoy ourselves and repent later?

Jesus gives parables and sayings of judgment as well as mercy. The parable of the Talents, the cursing of the fig tree, and the parable of the Ten Virgins end with judgment. And some parables portray both justice and mercy—the parable of the Unmerciful Servant, the parable of the King’s Son’s Wedding, and the parable of the Wheat and the Tares. Does Jesus give a more prominent place to justice or to mercy? I believe that in his words, parables, teachings, and deeds Jesus taught and acted with both justice and mercy. Every parable, every teaching, every action is imbued with, proceeds from, exemplifies, both mercy and justice.

But there is a tension between justice and mercy. As I have studied the gospel of Jesus Christ and pondered the meaning of his life, teachings, and atonement, I have come to the understanding that God is a God of unconditional love and the gospel is a message of grace and forgiveness. Jesus Christ in his life, words, and atonement manifests the love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness of God. I think we human beings tend to understand justice better than mercy and to prefer justice. I believe that the gospel message needs to emphasize mercy because we tend to give prominence to justice.

Because I see the gospel as a message of grace, forgiveness, and mercy, I get taken aback when I hear the grace interpreted out of it. I do not agree with the Mormon Sunday School interpretation of the Prodigal Son. The feast, not the inheritance, represents the kingdom of God. The symbol of the feast with its joy, making merry, and abundance—the feast offered freely to all—is a motif in many parables and scriptures. It is the symbol of the sacrament, the Lord’s Supper. The Older Brother refuses to enter heaven because his brother, a sinner, is there. He refuses to enter because of envy and self-righteousness. Yes, all that the Father has is his, but the Older Brother refuses to accept it and enjoy it. Concerned with justice, wanting to reap the rewards of his obedience, he cannot enter into the joy of the kingdom because the joy of the kingdom is accepting the love, forgiveness, grace, and mercy that is freely offered to all. If we do not love and forgive each other, we put ourselves outside the kingdom because love and mercy are the nature of the life that is in God.

Although I do not justify the Older Brother in his resentment and self-righteousness, I recognize something of myself in him. I am more like him than the Younger Brother, more interested in doing what’s right than in having a good time. The point of the parable is that salvation is by grace, not works, and we can receive and participate in God’s bounteous love whenever we come unto Christ. But the parable does not address the question of righteousness. The obedience of the Older Son was not true righteousness because it did not include mercy. How are justice and mercy related?

Many recent events and problems have given me and many others cause to reflect on the meaning of justice—the devastation of September

11th, the ensuing war on terrorism, the continuing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians with its escalating cycles of violence and retaliation, the United States' war on Iraq, justified as a pre-emptive defense against aggression from Iraq, and the willingness of many to give up freedom for security, a willingness based on the perceived need to identify, monitor, and punish "enemies." After the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, I was troubled by the talk about retribution and retaliation and the ready acceptance of many people of the war on terrorism. I was troubled by the rhetoric about evil enemies.

I picked up a book I had just bought called *What Is Justice?* and I was reminded that many people, including philosophers, see retribution and punishment as essential to justice. I quickly found many passages asserting this. John Stuart Mill writes:

We have seen that the two essential ingredients in the sentiment of justice are the desire to punish a person who has done harm and the knowledge or belief that there is some individual or individuals to whom harm has been done.¹

My title, "Does Justice Rob Mercy?," is a play on Alma's rhetorical question, "What, do you suppose that mercy can rob justice?" (Alma 42:25). My question is somewhat paradoxical. Mercy could rob, perhaps, but how could justice rob? Justice is just. But what claim does mercy have against justice? Would mercy have to rob justice to obtain a sphere of operation? Is there any aspect of life to which justice does not lay a claim?

A common idea about justice is that it is the infliction of punishment for breaking the law. Another idea is that it is receiving what one deserves—the eye for an eye concept of the Old Testament—retribution. These ideas are related, but not identical. According to these definitions, showing mercy is not demanding justice—not inflicting punishment or not seeking revenge or not demanding what one is owed. These definitions of justice and mercy make them contradictory concepts. They define justice as the primary concept; mercy is simply its contradiction. If retribution and punishment are essential to justice, is it a duty to punish wrongdoing? Is it a duty to seek retribution? Is it then wrong to be merciful?

What is justice? Justice is most commonly understood as a legal concept. The law, whether it be the law of a state, the rules or norms of a family, organization, or community, or the moral law, defines obligation and what is just. A positivistic interpretation of law simply equates law

1. John Stuart Mill, "John Stuart Mill from *Utilitarianism*," in *What Is Justice?* eds. Robert C. Solomon and Mark C. Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 259.

and justice; justice is whatever the law says it is. If this were true, however, it would never be possible to ask of a law or a set of laws, "Is it just?" But this question is always meaningful and always important. If it were not, it would not be possible to criticize a government as being tyrannical, authoritarian, or oppressive. It would not be possible to evaluate an ethical system or code of behavior. There must be a concept, an idea of justice, that, struggling to understand and articulate, we use as a standard to judge systems of law and particular laws and rules. Although it may not be possible to come to an agreement or a final conclusion about the exact nature of justice, the effort to understand, work out, and live according to principles of justice is an essential part of our personal and communal lives.

The concept of justice, then, is more fundamental than the concept of law. Justice is one of those concepts like love and truth which are at the root of reality. This ontological depth of justice can be seen in the wide-range of the questions that can be asked which are fundamentally questions of justice. They range from the abstract—"How should we relate to our fellow human beings?" "What makes a society good?" "What is the source of obligation?" "How is power legitimated?" "How should a society distribute its resources?" "What is the purpose of punishment and how do we justify it?" "How do we reconcile competing rights?" "How do we respond to violence?"—to the practical—"Should inequalities in wealth be adjusted by taxing the rich?" "Should minorities be given preference in hiring and in admission to educational programs?" "Should capital punishment be outlawed?"—to the personal—"What should I do about the malicious gossip that is being spread about me?" "How can I get out of or change an abusive relationship?" "Should I give money to the beggar on the street?"

A definition of justice that encompasses all of the uses of the word and all of the ideas and questions considered in the concept and that is not limited to a particular culture or society is hard to come by. Plato considered the idea of justice in the context of the just society. In Plato's *Republic* Socrates says "that justice is 'doing one's own'—every person's performing his or her proper role in the community." For him, justice is both "harmony in the soul" and "harmony in the state." It is the "rule of reason."² For Aristotle justice is equality and proportion, every person receiving according to what he deserves.³ Tillich defines justice as "the form in which the power of being actualizes itself,"⁴ thus putting justice

2. Robert C. Solomon and Mark C. Murphy, "Introduction," *What Is Justice?*, 3.

3. *Ibid.*, 4.

4. Paul Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analyses and Ethical Application* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 56.

at the foundation of being, secondary only to being itself. I put truth in this place. I see justice as occupying the next level of reality. I define justice as right relationship. Truth is the form of being and justice is the right relationship of all forms of being. Justice is both the law that defines the nature of this right relationship and the dynamic state of being that exists when beings freely actualize their purposes in love and truth.

What is the nature of this right relationship? We seek to define it through law and actualize it through living. Paradoxically, we also need to define it through living and actualize it through understanding. If we reduce our pursuit of justice to law so that the law is supreme, we reap the consequences of legalism—the tyranny of rules, guilt, dishonesty, coercion, and violence. But if we seek to live without trying to understand the law, we lose an important defense against rationalization and self-centeredness which can take the form of competition and enmity, leading to either the tyranny of the self or the tyranny of the other. Sentimentality, dishonesty, coercion, and violence can result.

This paradox is another way of looking at the paradox of justice and mercy. We have seen that if retribution and punishment are regarded as essential to justice, then justice and mercy must be mutually exclusive. In a particular circumstance I could be either just or merciful but not both. I might be merciful on some occasions and just on other occasions, but I could never be both merciful and just at the same time. Most people would agree that mercy is a virtue, that sometimes it is good to be merciful. Justice is also good. How do I know when I should be merciful and when I should be just? Is there some principle or law to guide me or is mercy simply a matter of caprice or impulse? I am merciful when I feel like being merciful and just when I feel like being just. If we take, instead, the larger view of justice as right relationship, does mercy become, not contradictory to justice, but part of it? Can we write mercy into the law and, if we do, is mercy a superfluous concept? If mercy is part of justice, why do we need a concept of mercy at all?

Another way to understand this paradox is to consider the relationship of gifts and obligation. The purpose of the law is to define obligation. A just person fulfills his obligations. The law tells us what we ought to do. But shouldn't we give gifts? Surely a good person is one who gives gifts. Are gifts then obligatory? But a gift by its very nature is freely given. Can something given truly be a gift if it is given to fulfill a duty? Do we have a duty to give to the poor and is this a requirement of mercy or justice? Should the well-being of some depend on the mercy of others or does everyone have a right to the good and the goods? And do we all have an obligation to see that each person's rights are defended and each person has a fair share of the goods?

If justice defines right relationship, it must also include mercy, forgiveness, empathy, love, and giving, for all these are characteristic of

good relationships. But empathy, love, mercy, and forgiveness cannot be commanded either to others or to oneself. Even if I desire to forgive someone and feel it is my duty to do so, I may not be able to forgive him. Forgiveness comes as a gift not only to the one receiving it, but also to the one who offers it. Love in all its forms is always a gift. Paradoxically, although it comes from the will, it cannot be attained by an act of will. Should the law require us to do something it is not in our power to do?

But the two foundational commandments of Christian ethics are to love God and our neighbor. Christian teachings require us to forgive, to love our enemies, to give to those who ask of us even more than they ask, to serve others, to overcome anger, envy, lust, and hate, to refrain from judgment. Some see these teachings as a higher law than the law of justice—that mercy replaces justice. The common Mormon view is that the atonement of Christ fulfills the demand of justice (that we be punished for our sins) so that God can then be merciful to us. This view sees God's mercy being extended to us on the condition that we repent of our sins and fulfill the commandments of the higher law. But then we are back in the realm of justice and required to meet an infinite obligation, an obligation which can neither be defined by the law nor fulfilled by any person.

My view is that justice and mercy form a complementary duality, not a contradictory opposition. They are mutually dependent, not mutually exclusive. Mutually exclusive opposites contradict each other. Logically, they are "a" and "not a." Both cannot be true. Existential examples of mutually exclusive opposition are harder to find. Perhaps "on" and "off" are a mutually exclusive pair. "The light is on" and "the light is off" cannot be true at the same time. The mutually exclusive "on" and "off" are the basis of computer technology. However, the concept of "on" is dependent on the concept of "off," so in some sense "on" and "off" form a complementary opposition. The computer could not exist without the possibility of both "on" and "off." Mutually dependent opposites cannot be separated.

Lehi asserts that complementary duality is the essence of existence. He says:

For it must needs be that there is an opposition in all things. If not so, my first-born in the wilderness, righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad. Wherefore, all things must needs be a compound in one; wherefore, if it should be one body it must needs remain as dead, having no life neither death, nor corruption, neither incorruption, happiness, nor misery, neither sense nor insensibility. . . . And if these things are not there is no God. And if there is no God we are not, neither the earth; for there could have been no creation of things, neither to act nor to be acted upon; wherefore, all things must have vanished away. (2 Nephi 2:11)

Notice that Lehi says that this necessary opposition is *in* all things, not *of* all things. It is the opposition of balance, harmony, life, flow, of giving and receiving, of activity and passivity—not the opposition of enmity and rivalry.

I call the principle that Lehi describes the principle of polarity. The magnet illustrates this principle. It possesses both a negative and a positive pole. Although joined together, each pole retains its identity. If the magnet is broken in half, each half will contain its own poles. It is impossible to have a magnet with just one pole. The properties of matter require the existence of complementary particles. Although these particles are attracted to each other and form a whole, they cannot merge completely or matter would cease to exist. The principle of polarity applies to all of reality; it is the ancient concept of yin and yang.

The principles of righteousness or goodness are polar pairs that must exist in balance. Each member of the pair is of equal value and importance. If they are separated or if one is ignored and the other privileged, they become false and sin results. Because justice and mercy are complementary opposites, they cannot exist apart from each other. Justice without mercy is not justice; if we reduce mercy to justice or subsume it within or exclude it from justice, justice becomes legalistic, retributive, punishing, and coercive. Mercy without justice becomes sentimental, dishonest, manipulative, and complicit in evil.

Because justice and mercy are primary aspects of reality, the relationship of justice and mercy can only be understood ontologically, that is, in order to understand this relationship we need to understand the structure of reality. I have some grasp of the problems of defining an ontology—no one has access to absolute truth. However, I do not think these problems are avoided by refusing to engage in the study of the nature of being. We all have a world-view, and it seems to me that it is good to be conscious that we have a world-view. It is better to try to understand what that view is and to attempt to create a world-view that contains more truth than to simply assume that our world-view is reality or to assume that all world-views are equally valid (which amounts to believing that there is no truth) or to believe that we have no world-view and thus avoid the dangers of belief.

The world-view that I will present is based on ideas from many sources. It is my synthesis and interpretation of these ideas, the product of my thinking about, studying, and experiencing the nature of reality. I am not able here to indicate the sources of the ideas or develop them fully or present a defense of them. I will simply present them and then use them to answer some of the questions I have raised, hoping that they will prove to be useful and enlightening. I will contrast this world-view, which I believe to be good and true, although not complete, with another world-view which I think is common, mistaken, and the source of many ills.

This second world-view is the competitive world-view. The belief at the foundation of this view is that the good of one is achieved at the expense of another. I can only win if you lose. My well-being depends on your ill-being. Pride, envy, greed, fear, exploitation, abuse, and coercion are all part of a competitive world-view. The belief behind pride is that my worth is dependent on my being better than someone else. In envy the good of the other threatens me. There is not enough good for both of us. In greed I believe that I am not safe unless I get more and more. In fear I allow others to coerce me or I attack them to prevent them from doing me harm. The competitive world-view holds that truth is whatever wins or whatever you want it to be or that there is no truth.

The competitive world-view is essentially disintegrative. The principle of complementary opposition is not understood or accepted. The oppositional pairs are separated and dichotomized. They are not mutually dependent but competitive. Each half seeks to destroy, dominate, or ignore the other. In this world-view, either there is no evil or evil is an essential aspect of reality. *Good and evil become a complementary oppositional pair.* If reality is fundamentally competitive, if the good of some must be achieved at the expense of others, then evil is built into the nature of reality and our choices amount to being either a victim or a perpetrator. Many people hold such beliefs, and consequently they live in and participate in creating a competitive reality.

A rejection of the competitive world-view entails a rejection of the idea that good and evil are a complementary oppositional pair. If good and evil were a complementary oppositional pair rather than a contradictory one, evil would be an essential part of reality, which would mean that good could not exist without evil. But if evil were an essential part of reality, if the existence of good were dependent on the existence of evil, would evil not be in some sense good? The words of Lehi that I quoted are often interpreted to mean that the fundamental opposition is between good and evil. Lehi does say that without the opposition in all things righteousness could not be brought to pass and wickedness could not be brought to pass, neither could good or bad be brought to pass. However, he does not say that righteousness requires wickedness nor that good cannot exist without bad. He says that both righteousness and wickedness, both good and bad arise out of this fundamental opposition in all things. He says that without this fundamental opposition there would be no existence and no creation and no God.

Although evil is not an essential part of reality, sin is part of the human condition. We are all sinners. That doesn't make us evil. There is a distinction between sin and evil. To sin is to cause or participate in causing harm to another person or any part of creation. Sin is not a matter of the will; we can sin without intending to. Evil is of the will; it puts itself above all creation and seeks to bring about its own good by ex-

plotting, dominating, or destroying others. We need to repent of our sins even if they were not intentional. If we love others, we will feel sorrow for causing harm and want to do whatever we can to bring about right relationship. If we refuse to repent, we are in danger of becoming evil.

The assumption underlying the concept of complementary opposition is that difference arises from unity. The origin of all things is unity, oneness, or undifferentiated Being. As the Creator, God is this Oneness, Being itself, the Source, the Origin. God creates out of the fullness of Being, which is God. This view of creation differs from the traditional Christian view that God creates out of nothing and the Mormon view that God is more an organizer than a creator. The Mormon view is based on Joseph Smith's teaching that "the mind or the intelligence that man possesses is co-equal with God himself."⁵ This has been interpreted by most Mormon thinkers to mean that individual identity is uncreated—that human beings began as uncreated intelligences existing independently from God. Many Mormon thinkers see this view as providing a solution to the problem of evil. If human beings exist independently of God, then evil does not have its origin in God but in humans. However, I think this view raises a more difficult problem of evil. If the universe were at its origin many rather than one, there would be no principle of unity and no possibility of transcending the many perspectives to come to a fullness of love and truth. Evil would exist as a fundamental part of reality; there would be an opposition *of* all things, not an opposition *in* all things. Eternal competition would be the nature of reality. But Joseph Smith's words could also be interpreted to mean that the intelligence which humans possess is part of the primal unity that is God, not a separate, individual entity.

Creation requires differentiation. The primary differentiation is the creation of the Other, the Logos, the Son. This differentiation is within God. If this were not so, God would not exist—as through creation, existence arises out of Being—and God would not be perfect—as perfection, or fullness or completion, comes about through differentiation within unity. Being itself is goodness and the primal duality of God's nature is love and truth, distinct but never separated.

This duality within God is reflected in all creation. It can be seen as the yin-yang duality. The yin is the passive, receptive, feminine half of the polarity, and the yang is the active, directive, masculine half. Each half contains the seed or image of its opposite, which symbolizes their unity. Yang is the principle of differentiation, but it seeks unity with its

5. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, ed. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1968), 352-353.

opposite. Yin is the principle of unity, but it releases and receives its opposite. The principle of life, of flow, is that yang is transformed into yin and yin into yang.

In creating, God distinguishes Godself from creation and thus creates self as God and creation as other. There is no self without the other, and for God (and humanity, created in the image of God) the self also contains an other, which makes it possible for the self to continually create itself. In creating, God created Godself as Creator. God the Son is the Creator because creation is active and directive—masculine. Section 93:29-30 of the Doctrine and Covenants reads:

Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be. All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence.

These verses can be interpreted according to the model which I am presenting. God is Being itself. Existence arises with the differentiation of Being that creates beings or entities. Truth is the form of being, and it requires agency—"independ[ence] in that sphere." Agency is the primary attribute of every entity. It is what makes every entity a being different than God. God will never violate agency. To do so would uncreate the beings that God has created. Honoring agency is a primary good; willfully violating it is evil.

The Bible teaches that God created humanity in the image of God. Humanity is like God. The universe manifests God since God is the Source and Creator of the universe. Each part of creation manifests part of the Fullness of Being or God. Since humanity is created in the image of God, a human being is a microcosm of the universe. Each person has within his or her being every aspect of reality. The Bible also teaches that God gave humanity dominion over all other aspects of creation. Dominion is usually interpreted to mean some kind of authority or control over. I believe that God's gift of dominion over all of creation is not the right to control or exercise authority over any aspect of creation (this is unrighteous dominion), but rather this gift of containing within one's self all aspects of reality. One's domain is the sphere in which one lives and has the ability to act and influence. Dominion is the exercise of this power. Justice defines the righteous exercise of this power.

Reality is traditionally divided into the spiritual, the physical, the mental, and the emotional. The primary division in creation is the spiritual and the physical, yang and yin, spirit and body, that which acts and that which is acted upon. In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. Heaven is the spiritual realm and earth is the physical. Spirit is the primordial substance or element. The terminology can become confusing because we don't have different words for each level of differenti-

ation. On the primal level, intelligence is yang and spirit is yin. Without form, the spirit is within Being itself. Given form, it is imbued with intelligence or the light of truth and becomes an independent being with some form of yin-yang organization. Human beings are like God because they are organized in the same way. At their center is intelligence or the light of truth, the creative, active part of God. As I said earlier, all entities have some degree of agency. Agency is connected to purpose. Entities other than human beings exercise their agency within the purpose of their creation. A tree grows and develops in the form of a tree and fulfills the purposes of a tree. Only human beings create and discover purpose and meaning, which gives us free agency.

On the level of the spiritual-physical duality, spirit is yang and the physical is yin. Again, this is somewhat confusing terminology because on the primordial level spirit is yin. However, it is the body, the external reality, of the other which we perceive and our spirit body consists of spirit element. Our spirit (spirit yin-element organized by yang-intelligence) is our core self, our interiority—the heart of our individual identity. It is characterized by purpose, agency, creativity, and choice. It is sometimes called the will. The spirit chooses and the body receives the form of that choice. The purpose of the body is to manifest the spirit. We perceive and communicate through the body.

Mind and emotion are more complex organizations of spirit and matter, yin and yang. They are created by further differentiation and synthesis. The rational and the emotional become paired as complementary opposites. The mind is associated with consciousness, truth, knowledge, and beliefs. The polarity of mind is yin-yang, yang moving toward yin, because mind itself is active, but ideas and images, that which mind creates, are passive. The purpose of the mind is to understand reality and create a world-view from which to act. Mind seeks objectivity and a view of the whole and how its parts are related. The mind gives us the ability to transcend the limitations placed on us by our bodies.

Consciousness is intentional; it is a subject that takes an object. From the perspective of consciousness, that which it views and creates is objective. From the perspective of another center of consciousness that perceives another subject viewing reality, the other's view of reality is subjective. And, of course, we can take ourselves as an object and become aware that our world-view and perceptions of the world are subjective. Ironically, that which seems most ourselves, our consciousness, is usually focused on the other. Although the mind is a subject, it seeks objectivity, a view of the whole and all its parts.

Emotions are subjective in that they reveal our perspective on what is close and how it relates to the self through feeling. While the mind seeks to see reality objectively, the emotions see reality as it relates to the self, to one's own values and purposes and the meaning of one's life in

the present moment. Our emotions are holistic, but they represent a complex reality. They are the result of a calculus that takes our present perceptions of what is happening around us and to us (seen through the framework of our beliefs about the nature of reality, our beliefs about good and evil, and our beliefs about ourselves and others) and evaluates these perceptions according to how what is happening affects our goals, values, and well-being and then presents us with a feeling that reflects and means all this. The polarity of emotion is yang-yin, yin moving toward yang. Emotions seek to bring out, to express what is within. We have all felt and can all name the primary emotions, but few of us devote our attention to understanding them. Yet they contain within them a wealth of information about our inner lives, information of vital importance for our pursuit of justice.

With this basic understanding of the nature of reality, we can explore the relationship between justice and mercy. I have defined justice as right relationship, both the law that defines the nature of this right relationship and the dynamic state of being that exists when beings freely actualize their purposes in love and truth. What is mercy? The fundamental duality within God (Goodness or Being itself) is love and truth, love (goodness giving itself in and to creation) being yang and truth (the form of goodness) being yin. All other dualities reflect this primary one. Justice, as the right relationship of beings (or Truth), corresponds with truth, and so mercy corresponds with love. Jesus taught that the first great commandment is to "love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. . . And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Mark 12:30-31). These commandments are not simply the most important commandments—they define the nature of right relationship.

We are told to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. These are the four parts of reality. Heart is spirit, the essence of one's self, the center of will. Soul is the subconscious part of ourselves or the emotions. Mind is our reason and understanding, and strength is our physical selves. The object of our love is the object of our desire, that which we value, the focus of our mind, that with which we seek to unite. To love something with all parts of ourselves means to put it at our center. That which we put in our center is that which gives meaning and purpose to our lives. We give our deepest loyalty and commitment to it; we serve it. It is our highest value, our God.

We all have an ultimate concern whether we call it God or something else, whether we are aware of it or not. Does it matter which God we serve? We all act to protect and serve our God. If our God is our nation or our family or our church or ourselves, we will act to protect the interests of our nation or our family or our church or ourselves. If our God encompasses only part of reality, we will necessarily create and participate in a competitive

world in which the good of some is sacrificed to promote the good of others. Only if our God is the God of truth, the God that understands and enters into all the forms of being, will we be able to overcome our prejudices and see through our rationalizations. If we are centered in ourselves or some limited group, we can never transcend our own perspective. Our mind gives us the ability to transcend our own perspective, but only if our spirit chooses to love will we be able to do so. Only if our God is the God of love who created all beings and loves them all, will we be able to love our neighbor as ourselves. The second commandment cannot be fulfilled unless we fulfill the first. Only when there is harmony and balance, right relationship within the self, can a person then relate with justice and mercy to others.

In his book, *The Hidden Gospel*, Neil Douglas-Klotz points out that the word translated as "love" in the English version of this passage is the word "rehem" in the Aramaic version. He says:

This love was derived from the old Hebrew word for womb (rahm) and is related by root to "Hokhmah [divine wisdom]." It could also be translated as "compassion" or "mercy," points to an emotion that comes from the depths of one's being. Literally it is a shining (RA) from a dense or dark interiority (ChM).⁶

This is the unconditional love of God that shines forth from the Source and like the sun gives its light to the just and the unjust. God as the origin of all things is in and through all things. God's love is an ever-present being-with that knows each being in and from its center and in the fullness of its being. "Chesed," the Hebrew word often translated as "mercy," means "loving kindness," "charity," or "fidelity." It is also a synonym of "covenant." Mercy is "covenant love." This shows the relationship of mercy to justice. Mercy is the unconditional love that binds itself, that obligates itself, by covenant to faithfulness.

We are ready now to consider retribution and punishment in the light of the understanding of the nature of justice and mercy that I have given. Neither retribution nor punishment is essential to the nature of justice as I have defined it. If retribution and punishment are not the very essence of justice as the common view holds, they cannot be justified as being justice itself. But even if they do not define justice, they might be necessary or useful in bringing about justice. Some questions we need to ask are: "Are retribution and punishment consistent with justice?" "Do they help to bring about right relationship?" "Are they consistent with mercy (defined as love)?" To answer these questions I will consider the reasons usually given to justify punishment.

6. Neil Douglas-Klotz, *The Hidden Gospel: Decoding the Spiritual Message of the Aramaic Jesus* (Wheaton, Illinois: Quest Books, 1999), 143.

A dictionary definition of punishment is "to cause to undergo pain, loss, or suffering for a crime or wrongdoing." But love desires the well-being of the other. Is not punishment, then, contrary to the nature of love? Defenses of punishment argue that although inflicting pain is generally wrong, punishment serves a higher purpose which justifies this infliction of pain. This argument is a form of the argument that the end justifies the means. Is it possible to do something good by doing evil? Do not the means determine the end? Can evil be overcome by evil? If defenders of punishment maintain that the good ends accomplished by punishment can be accomplished in no other way, they are defending a view of reality which holds that evil is necessary to bring about good.

A common reason given to justify punishment is that it deters wrongdoing. Punishment is an instrument of coercion. It seeks to get people to do what they might not choose to do themselves. It sets up rules with penalties that will be administered against those who do not comply with the rules. Coercion can be defined as any act in which a person or group of persons attempts to impose its will on others. Coercion can be accomplished by violence or the threat of violence or the infliction of pain, by punishment, by manipulation, and by lying.

Punishment distorts reality. In a rewards-punishment system we do something, not because we want to do it, but to avoid punishment or to gain a reward. The pursuit of truth, loving relationships, meaningful work, experiencing beauty are inherently good and lead to joy. Love, beauty, and truth are intrinsically rewarding. Sin is intrinsically alienating, isolating, depressing, and confusing. The goodness achieved in a rewards-punishment system is not true goodness. It is only outward, not of the heart or mind.

Coercion violates agency. I showed earlier that agency is a primary good, thus violating agency is always wrong. God never violates agency. Jean Hampton defines punishment as "the experience of defeat at the hands of the victim (either directly or indirectly through a legal authority). Punishment always involves the attempt to master another human being."⁷ and "punishment [is] the experience of . . . being dominated."⁸ Section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants unequivocally condemns coercion. It says, "when we undertake to . . . exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, in any degree of unrighteousness, behold, the heavens withdraw themselves; the Spirit of the Lord is grieved" (D&C 121:37). Sometimes the phrase "in any degree

7. Jeffrie G. Murphy and Jean Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, Cambridge Studies in Philosophy and Law, ed. Jules Coleman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 126.

8. *Ibid.*, 127.

of unrighteousness" is interpreted as a qualifier—compulsion can sometimes be righteous. However, the text does not support this interpretation. It says that compulsion is always wrong in *any* degree, even though there are differing degrees of unrighteousness involved in exercising it. Even legitimate authority (priesthood) should not use compulsion. The verse says that righteous dominion is without compulsory means.

Most legal theorists acknowledge that there is no conclusive evidence that punishment deters crimes. Most people obey the law out of respect for law, from a belief that the laws are good and promote the general good, from a sense of duty, or for social reasons. Perhaps some people refrain from wrongdoing out of a fear of punishment, but many people commit crimes despite the fact that they risk being punished if caught. Coercion uses fear as its motivating force. When we are in freedom, love is the motivating force. When we are free, we do what we love.

A common defense of punishment is that it is reformatory. It is argued that punishment educates people and helps them reform their lives. The idea is that if they understood that what they did was wrong through direct experience, then they would reform their behavior. Sometimes people do harm others without realizing it. But do we need to punish them to help them understand this? Couldn't we just explain it to them? Do we need to lose an eye in order to understand that losing an eye is bad? Most of us do not need experience in what it feels like to be hurt. We have more need to know how it feels to be truly loved, esteemed, valued, and cared for.

Another important argument made in favor of punishing wrongdoers is that it is necessary in order to establish and maintain respect for the law. This view sees punishment as establishing the seriousness of wrongdoing. If there is no punishment for breaking the law, then we are not serious about its importance. This view is deeply imbedded in our culture, so much so that the common interpretation of law is that it is commands, rules, or orders backed by the threat of punishment for non-compliance. The common view is that governments are responsible to punish those who violate their laws and God is responsible to punish those who break the moral law or God's laws. In this view an offense is not simply an injury done to another person, but it is an offense to the authority of the state, an offense to morality itself, or an offense to God. In a famous passage Kant argues that even if a society were about to dissolve itself by common agreement, its members would be obliged to execute the last murderer. To fail to do so would be to condone the murder and be accomplices in the crime.

I agree with Kant and others that to fail to do something when an offense is committed is to condone the offense. But why does our response to wrongdoing need to be to punish the offender? How does punishing the perpetrator bring about right relationship?

An assumption underlying this view is that real power is coercive power. A person with real power imposes his or her will on others. A person with real power commands and others obey. A person with real power exercises authority over others. Section 121 tells us the purposes of coercive power: to “cover our sins” (to sin without accountability), to “gratify our pride” (make us feel superior to others), to “gratify our vain ambition” (force others to serve us and help us achieve our unrighteous purposes), and to “exercise control, dominion or compulsion upon the souls” of others. The idea that power is coercive is so embedded in our culture that we tend to see power as coercive by its very nature.

Section 121 defines the righteous use of power: (1) Persuasion. This includes speaking the truth, both the truth about principles of righteousness and the truth about offenses that have been committed and what needs to be done to bring about justice. If we want others to help us achieve our purposes, we persuade them that our purposes are good and of benefit to them and others. (2) Long-suffering. One meaning of suffering is to allow or tolerate. Part of love is letting be. This is the complement to being with. Letting be means respecting, allowing, and encouraging others’ agency. (3) Gentleness, meekness, love unfeigned, kindness without hypocrisy and without guile. (4) Pure knowledge which greatly enlarges the soul.

Because we have agency, we have intrinsic power—the power to create, the power to carry out our purposes, the power to understand and communicate truth, the power to live and effect change. To seek power beyond our intrinsic power is to seek coercive power, to seek another’s power. Is the power of truth and of love greater than the power of coercion? Coercion seeks to override another’s agency by threats. The ultimate threat that coercion can make is death. Since agency is essential to our selfhood, all forms of coercion threaten a form of death. Sec. 121 tells us what power is greater than the power of coercion. We are told that after reproofing someone for an offense, we should show him an increase of love so “that he may know that thy faithfulness is stronger than the cords of death.” Reproofing with sharpness (speaking the truth) and then showing forth an increase of love (the faithfulness of mercy) is shown as an alternative to punishment (the cords of death) for responding to wrongdoing.

Understanding the law without punishment affixed to it is difficult at first because the other view of law is so pervasive. But God’s commandments are not orders backed by the threat of punishment. The Aramaic word for commandment comes from a root meaning to visit, inspect, inquire, or review regularly.⁹ God’s commandments are those principles of righteousness which we need to visit regularly. We need to

9. Neil Douglas-Klotz, *The Hidden Gospel*, 152.

inspect them and review them and ask questions about them in order to understand them. We need to inspect ourselves and review our lives to see if we are living in accordance with them. If we love God and truth and others and desire to live justly, then we will do this.

The law that defines the nature of right relationships does not tell us what to do. Its purpose is not to condemn us or judge us or punish us. Neither is it to justify us or excuse us. Its purpose is to help us understand the nature of righteousness, of right relations, of goodness. However, it cannot fully disclose the nature of justice because this can only be brought about by living in freedom, truth, and love.

There is another reason that righteous law does not tell us what to choose. This would violate our agency. There is a difference between what is right and what we should do or choose. We live in freedom. The spirit chooses and should not yield this responsibility, even to the law. We act from our desire. Our desire seems good to us. Sometimes a person needs to sin in order to manifest desire that is not good—in order to learn, to have the possibility of repentance. Only the agent can decide what he should do, which is not to say that whatever he chooses is good or right, but it may be necessary for his growth.

Another justification for punishment is that it is retribution, which is assumed to be an essential part of justice. The definition of justice that is operative here is justice as desert. It is just that a person receive what he has earned. If he has injured someone else, he should have a similar injury inflicted upon him. This is the principle of an eye for an eye. The roots of retribution mean “a paying back.” On the positive side, it is the law of the harvest—we reap what we sow. I agree that this is an important principle of justice, of right relationship. If there were no relationship between cause and effect, it would be a chaotic, unjust world, a world in which we could not exercise freedom because we would have no way of knowing what our choices would bring about.

Does the law of the harvest require that we retaliate or seek revenge? If we fail to retaliate are we promoting injustice or condoning evil? If justice requires retribution, who is responsible to do the paying back? If legitimate authority carries it out according to the law, it is punishment. If the one offended seeks retribution or retaliates, it is revenge. There is no essential difference between punishment and retribution, so arguing that punishment is justified because it is retribution is to beg the question. I believe that revenge or retribution is wrong because it seeks to bring harm to another person. Those who defend retribution argue that it is harm done for a reason. But the original offender had a reason for what he did, no doubt. To this the retributionist responds that retaliation is justified and legitimate, whereas the original offense was not. But what justifies retribution? Institutionalizing it does not. Legalizing it does not. The only way to justify retribution is to show that it brings about right

relationship. But retribution does not increase love or show respect for the agency of the other; it does not arise from esteeming the other as myself. Instead of restoring or bringing about right relationship, it leads to hatred, resentment, and cycles of retaliation. I have not heard any argument that shows that retribution leads to right relationship or seen an example in history or in my life that shows it.

Jean Hampton argues for a retributionist theory of punishment. She says:

To inflict on a wrongdoer something comparable to what he inflicted on a victim is to master him in the way that he mastered the victim. The score is even. Whatever mastery he can claim, she can also claim. If her victimization is taken as evidence of her inferiority relative to the wrongdoer, then his defeat at her hands negates that evidence. Hence the *lex talionis* calls for a wrongdoer to be subjugated in a way that symbolizes his being the victim's equal. The punishment is a second act of mastery that denies the lordship asserted in the first act of mastery.¹⁰

Hampton depicts a thoroughly competitive world in which one person demonstrates his superiority over another by harming her in some way. And the way Hampton wants to remedy this wrong is to let the victim or her representatives hurt the offender in some way to demonstrate that they are equal. But doesn't this simply affirm the values of a competitive system in which people demonstrate their superiority over each other by defeating them and mastering them? We affirm the intrinsic worth of people, not by assisting them in evening the score, but by respecting their agency and relating to them in love and truth, with justice and mercy.

In revenge we seek to harm the person who hurt us or someone close to us. We are "paying back" the harm done to us. We know that what was done to us was wrong, yet we choose to do this wrong to someone else. In choosing to do what we know is wrong, we call evil good, because that which we choose to do we affirm as good. If we return evil for evil, we affirm evil, we manifest it, we choose it, we bring it into reality.

The law of the harvest is a yin principle, not a yang principle, that is to say, it is not anyone's responsibility to see that the sinner gets what she deserves. The universe (the nature of reality) will restore to her what she has chosen. That which we do is that which we choose, that which we choose is that which we desire, and that which we desire and seek to bring about through our agency we will receive. We live in the world we create. If we do not repent of pride, envy, greed, and exploitation of others, we will live in a competitive world and be subject to the pride, envy, greed, and abuse of others. Alma says:

10. Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 128.

Therefore, O my son, whosoever will come may come and partake of the waters of life freely; and whosoever will not come the same is not compelled to come; but in the last day it shall be restored unto him according to his deeds.

If he has desired to do evil, and has not repented in his days, behold, evil shall be done unto him, according to the restoration of God. (Alma 42:27-28)

Alma also says, as does Lehi, that there is a law given and a punishment affixed. Does this contradict what I have said about punishment and the nature of law? Perhaps, but not necessarily. Alma also says that “the law inflicteth the punishment.” Law, as we usually think of it, cannot inflict punishment. It can prescribe it, but only another person can inflict it. Perhaps Alma is talking about the order in the universe that returns to us that which we give. We could extend the Golden Rule to say, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, for that which you do unto others will surely be done unto you.”

Of course, there are many scriptures that say or seem to say that God punishes the wicked. However, I do not think that God punishes anyone because punishment is coercive and contrary to love as I have tried to show. Here are a couple of scriptures that support my view of God’s “punishment” as being the yin law of the harvest:

But, behold, the judgments of God will overtake the wicked; and it is by the wicked that the wicked are punished; for it is the wicked that stir up the hearts of the children of men unto bloodshed (Mormon 4:5).

Also, because their hearts are corrupted, and the things which they are willing to bring upon others, and love to have others suffer, may come upon themselves to the very uttermost (D&C 121:13).

I realize that many scriptures could be found which would seem to contradict my view. The usual view of God’s justice is a yang view: it is God’s responsibility to bring all people to judgment and reward the righteous and punish the wicked. The metaphors governing our thinking are metaphors of coercive power—armies destroying the wicked; policemen capturing criminals, who are brought before a judge and tried and punished; fire, flood, or earthquake destroying the wicked. We have images of hell where the wicked are subjected to pain and torment.

My view of God’s justice is based on the life, teachings, parables, and atonement of Jesus Christ. In his atonement, Jesus subjected himself to the forces of evil that hated, condemned, and killed him, seeking to defeat and even destroy him. He was victorious over the powers of evil because he did not return evil for evil. He returned hatred with love, lies with truth, violence with forgiveness, condemnation with acceptance, curses with blessings. The Jews expect a Messiah who will destroy their enemies and establish justice with coercive power; the Christians expect Jesus to return and destroy the wicked and establish justice with coercive power.

But Jesus' response to coercive power was to die. If we believe in Christ, we will also die to the world of coercive power—the world of competition and enmity where the good of one is won at the expense of the other. Jesus said:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

He that believeth on him is not condemned; but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.

For everyone that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. (John 3:16-19)

All who believe in Christ have eternal life. Those who do not are condemned, but not by God. Their condemnation is not punishment by God, but their failure to receive the light, the life that God brings to them. And the reason they love darkness and do not want light is because their deeds are evil. Do they reject light because they want to keep on doing evil or because they are afraid of punishment and rejection if their deeds are exposed?

But Christ offers life and light, not to those who have never sinned, but to those who believe in him. God's love, given to the world through Christ, is free to all on the basis of faith in Christ. Faith in Christ is not a work to earn salvation but an acceptance of the love that is eternally present. To believe in Christ, to accept Christ's love, is to give up—to place no faith in—the power of coercion, to renounce the cords of death.

We die in and with Christ to the powers of death and we are raised with him into life. Jesus let the powers of enmity, competition, coercion, and death do their worst to him. He did not return evil for evil; he died. He subjected himself fully to the conditions of mortality, but his love never failed. I do not accept the satisfaction or substitutionary interpretation of the atonement, which claims that Christ's sacrifice is a necessary condition of God's forgiveness of our sins, since the punishment of sin is necessary to satisfy divine justice. Forgiveness flows freely from God's love and mercy. Jesus died, not to satisfy a divine demand for justice, but to break the power of coercion and free us from the power of sin. He died because the powers of evil had become so great that they would kill God rather than repent. God raised Jesus from the dead, he rose again, because the power of love is greater than the power of evil.

I have argued that punishment and retribution are wrong because they are coercive and contrary to love and because they do not bring about justice but instead damage people and relationships. How do we bring about justice when an offense has been committed? Justice is restored or brought about through repentance, forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation. Who needs to repent? Everybody. Who needs to forgive? Everybody. Who needs healing? Everybody.

We need to distinguish between culpability, accountability, and responsibility. When we ask, "Who is responsible for this mess?" we usually mean, "Who did this?" or "Who caused this to happen?" The person who caused the problem is culpable, at fault, to blame. Sometimes it is not easy to determine who is at fault. There are not always a clear victim and a clear perpetrator, although sometimes there are. But usually there is some fault on both or various sides of a conflict. Why do we need to know who caused a problem? Often we want to know so we know whom to punish or disapprove of or revile against or heap guilt upon or be angry with. But if we renounce punishment in all its forms, do we need to know who is at fault and what the nature of the offense was? Yes, because knowing the truth is very important in repentance, forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation.

Renouncing punishment does not mean doing nothing about offenses. Offenders need to be made accountable for their offenses. This means the injured person (or his or her representative) goes to the offender and tells him (or her) that he has offended him and asks him to account for what he has done. Ideally, the one offended (perhaps with the help of a mediator) explains how he was hurt; he shows the nature of the offense, enabling the offender to empathize with him and understand why what he did was wrong. This gives the offender an opportunity to seek to understand and explain why he did what he did. Misunderstandings between the offender and the one offended can be addressed and cleared up. This process helps both people to empathize with the other and understand him or herself, which gives both of them the opportunity to repent, to see things differently, and to forgive, to desire the well-being of the other. Repentance and forgiveness, like justice and mercy, cannot be separated. The righteous way to deal with sin is to hold the sinner accountable, to tell her the truth about her sin, and show her an increase of love. If she fails to repent and continues to perpetrate abuse, then boundaries can be drawn in the way we associate with her.

Responsibility is about healing, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. It is appropriate to require an offender to compensate his victim or make amends in some way. This is not punishment. Punishment inflicts harm on the offender. Requiring people to make amends for harm they have inflicted is not inflicting harm on them. Of course, they may not want to make amends. Although we might compel them to make

some kind of physical compensation to the injured person, we cannot compel them to restore or seek right relationship, although we hope that holding people accountable for their sins, telling them the truth in a spirit of love, will help them want to.

Justice requires repentance, forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation, but we cannot and should not compel another person to repent, forgive, heal, or be reconciled. My repentance, my forgiving, my healing are my own responsibility. Others can help me by loving me, forgiving me, and helping me understand the truth, but to take away the responsibility for my repentance, my healing, or my forgiving from me would be to violate my agency. Although these things are my responsibility, I cannot accomplish them by myself. Although I desire to repent, I cannot do it without Christ's atonement and unconditional love. I cannot forgive by an act of will. Although I seek healing, I cannot bring it about by myself. But if I desire and seek these things, they will come as gifts from God. Reconciliation with the one I have hurt or the one who has hurt me, reconciliation with my enemy, however, depends on her willingness to repent, forgive, and heal as well as my own.

Jesus tells us to love our enemy:

Ye have heard that it hath been said, thou shalt love thy neighbor and hate thine enemy.

But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;

That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven; for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust. (Matt.5:43-45)

We might ask, echoing the lawyer, "Who is my enemy?" According to Jesus' words, our enemy is one who curses us, one who hates us, one who uses us despitefully and persecutes us. Our neighbor is the one who is near us. He might also be our enemy. Our enemy might also be the one we hate, the one we blame for our misfortunes, the one we envy. Our enemy might also be parts of ourselves that we hate. We might project these parts onto someone else and hate him.

How do I love my enemy? I love him by forgiving him. This does not require me to condone his wrongdoing or excuse it. Indeed, if I condone what he did or excuse it, there is nothing to forgive. It requires me to repent of any desire for revenge against him. Love requires me to desire his well-being and treat him kindly. It requires me to respect his agency.

We hope that if we love our enemy, if we forgive him and do not seek retribution, he will respond to our love and cease to be our enemy. When the people of Ammon laid down their weapons and refused to fight with

or flee from those who were attacking them, some of the attackers experienced a change of heart and repented and threw down their weapons of war. However, many people were killed before this change of heart took place, and some of the attackers did not repent, but continued to kill people.

Does loving our enemies mean allowing them to destroy us? If retaliation is wrong, how can we defend ourselves against those who attack and seek to harm us? Defending ourselves is not the same as seeking revenge. Defending ourselves is not the same as administering punishment. We can defend ourselves and others by protesting wrongs and asking offenders to repent, by reproving with sharpness. Sometimes we can defend ourselves by retreating. But sometimes defending ourselves requires that we fight back. Is this ever justified?

In Section 98 of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord gives the law for just self-defense. The first time our enemy smites us we should bear it patiently without reviling our enemy or seeking revenge. We should do the same the second and third times he smites us, then we should warn him not to smite us again. If he does, then we are justified in retaliating against him. But if our enemy repents of his wrongdoing against us, we should forgive him every time he repents and not count the offense he has repented of against him. The same law applies to nations as individuals.

Does the existence of this law mean that retaliation is a just principle under certain circumstances? If we can define the circumstances under which retaliation is justified, then isn't retaliation a just principle? I see this law more as an example of how to negotiate the difficulties of dealing with evil than as the definition of a just principle.

Bearing offenses patiently, forgiveness, is clearly the guiding principle. But if our enemy does not respond to our overtures of peace and continues to smite us, "if he has sought thy life, and thy life is endangered by him, thine enemy is in thy hands and thou art justified (D&C 98:31)." But if we choose to spare our enemy even when we are justified, according to this law, in retaliating, that is righteous. And the purpose of the retaliation is not revenge, but self-defense, and the purpose of self-defense is to prevent our attacker from hurting us, not to hurt our attacker. However, once we start fighting, this distinction is hard to maintain. In fighting, we have entered the realm of competition and enmity. Although we might succeed in defending ourselves from certain kinds of harm, we cannot succeed in establishing right relationship through retaliation.

We live in a world where evil exists and where we must at times respond to the challenges that evil puts before us. Can we relate to evil without participating in evil? We write excuses into the law because we understand that circumstances arise in which keeping the law is prob-

lematic. The law says, "Thou shalt not kill," but if someone is threatening to kill me, then I am "justified" in defending myself, perhaps even in killing him. But is my taking of this person's life a good thing? Does it cause me or others any harm?

One reason we write excuses into the law is because, recognizing that under certain circumstances there are good reasons for breaking the law, we do not think it is just to punish people who break the law for these reasons. This is certainly a just feature of codes of law for nations and organizations that punish those who disobey their laws. But do we need to write excuses into the moral law and into God's law for the same reason? As I have thought about this question, I have come to the realization that our deeply-rooted belief that punishment is an essential feature of justice distorts the purpose of law. If punishment itself is not good, not a part of right relationship and hence unjust, then writing it into the law makes the law unjust. This injustice is not remedied by writing excuses into the law. Excuses may free us from punishment, but they do not free us from the harmful effects of sin. Another reason for writing excuses into the law is so that we can sin with impunity. We believe that if there is no punishment, there is no sin. But sin carries its own harm. Pride, greed, envy, and other sins are intrinsically harmful to right relationship; they prevent loving relationship and the understanding of truth; they work against harmony, beauty, and peace. Sin can only be remedied by repentance and forgiveness, which can only be attained in and through mercy.

Punishment impedes true repentance. We may believe that in being punished we have paid for our sin and thus have no need to repent. We may believe that we were unjustly punished and be filled with resentment. Or we may internalize the condemnation that punishment represents and believe that we are unloved and unlovable. All of these results of punishment prevent right relationship. Punishment covers up, does not attend to, the need for right relationship. The sinner faces the pain of punishment, but an even greater threat to him is the withdrawal of love, being condemned as a person unworthy of love and respect. We may write excuses into the law and get caught up in self-justification in order to avoid punishment, but the fear of the withdrawal of love and respect is a deeper fear. Love, unconditional love, the faithfulness of mercy that loves in spite of sin, is the source and foundation of right relationship. Without God's love we cannot repent and forgive. We get caught up in rationalization and self-justification or in resentment and cycles of revenge, or we are weighed down with guilt and self-condemnation. But within the power of God's unconditional love, we can attend to understanding the truth and working for reconciliation. We can repent and forgive and seek relationships of love in truth, freedom, and harmony.

If we take punishment out of the law and if love is merciful and is

not withdrawn from the sinner, the law can be just; it can become neither an instrument of condemnation or coercion nor a means of rationalization, but a light to our understanding and an aid to living in right relationship.

Although forgiveness requires me to repent of any desire for revenge against my enemy, it does not require me to like him or approve of him or associate with him. But love is greater than forgiveness. It requires me to love him in spite of sin.

Although love is not equivalent to approval, approval is an aspect of love. Love sees truly and judges justly; it sees whatever is good and considers it good and sees whatever is not good and considers it not good. It is attracted to, it delights in, it desires to be with whatever is good. While love does not approve of what we do or are that is not good, love does know and approve of everything about us that is good. Everyone has good in them and has the capacity to choose good. Choosing evil un-makes us, and a person who no longer had the capacity to choose good would be totally unmade. It would be contradictory to say, "I love you, but I despise everything about you."

God's unconditional love, God's mercy, is the love of being-with, the love of compassion, the love that is ever-faithful, the love that heals sin and makes repentance possible. Yet there are scriptures that say that God withdraws his spirit because of some sins. I do not believe that God withdraws his spirit as a punishment. Some sins are a rejection of God's spirit. If we reject God's spirit, then it is withdrawn out of respect for our agency. It would be more correct, I think, to say that we reject God's spirit. But as soon as we are receptive to any degree of God's spirit, it is there to enlighten us and to comfort us and heal us.

The scriptures make it clear that part of God's plan for our world is a time of judgment when the righteous will be separated from the wicked. The popular imagination sees this as God finally revealing his Almighty power and whipping the wicked into shape or destroying them with a mighty hand. But is this not the kind of power that Christ came into the world to defeat?

In the parable of the Sheep and the Goats, Jesus gives us a way to think about this judgment. The criterion he uses for separating the sheep from the goats is not their doing good works, keeping the commandments, professing belief in Jesus, or having a knowledge of how they are saved. The sheep do not know why they are being given eternal life. They receive eternal life because they fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, took in the stranger, clothed the naked, and visited those who were sick and in prison. The hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and those in prison were the "least of these my brethren." They were the world's losers, those without worldly power. Jesus identifies himself with the least. They are his brethren. Those who give to those

without power simply because they are in need affirm the worth of the least, those who have nothing to offer in return. In accepting the worth of the least we accept Jesus, who made himself equal to the least and in doing so made the least equal to himself. Jesus saves with love, the love that is merciful and gives without condition. The goats did not regard those without worldly power and thus did not accept Jesus.

Although the goats are separated from the sheep, the goats still belong to the shepherd and he still cares for them. The power of the atonement is to bring everyone into the presence of God for the final judgment. And what will we feel in God's presence? Will we feel love or condemnation? Since God is perfect love, to be in God's presence is to be in the presence of perfect love. Surely God will be loving to each person who enters his presence.

The goats are those who reject this love. They do not feel it because they love darkness rather than light. They love the darkness that permits them to believe that their sins—pride, greed, envy, and coercion—are good. Because they reject God's love and choose darkness rather than truth, they are sent away, or rather, they go away to the place they have chosen. Hell is also a place of mercy as well as judgment, a place where those who have chosen pride, enmity, and coercion are given what they choose: a place of unbridled competition, a place to exploit and be exploited, to lie and be lied to, to punish and be punished, to exact revenge and to be afflicted with revenge. Hell is not the place for those whom God rejects but the place for those who reject God.

Those who have faith in Christ, who love the light, who see and give to the least of these, who are with Christ among the least, will feel God's love. To feel God's love is to be filled with goodness, to have one's essential goodness affirmed. To accept God's unconditional love is to be filled with that goodness—to be good. To know God's love is to know goodness. To know goodness is to choose goodness. To choose goodness is to be good. The eternal life that God gives to all who love him is a life in which justice and mercy are perfectly joined. Only through truth sought in love, can right relationship be understood or brought about.