Love Thy Neighbor

Armand Nicholi: In Freud's attack on the spiritual worldview one of his main complaints is that nothing runs so counter to the original nature of people than the basic precept of loving your neighbor as yourself. But Lewis is saying regardless of how we feel toward the person, we have control over our will to want the best for that person and act accordingly. What's your reaction to these two diametrically opposed opinions?

Michael Shermer: Well I agree with Freud. It's moral and good to start off cooperating and be altruistic, but if the other person defects and keeps cheating and lying or whatever, you're just an idiot if you keep cooperating. There's nothing moral about that. You're a fool. The Jesus ethic sounds better and it's a good way to start, but what people actually do is they start off cooperating, and if the other person defects, then they do a tit for tat thing, which is the wisest strategy in the long run.

Margaret Klenck: But cooperation's not love. I mean I absolutely agree with you that if somebody's kicking me in the shins I'm going to stop him. If somebody's robbing me I'm going to call the police. That doesn't mean I can't love that person. I mean I think we're talking about empathy here. I can still call the police on this guy, but I don't say "you're attacking me so you're bad and I'm good."

Michael Shermer: I think what Freud means is actually expressing genuine love and affection for somebody that's a stranger that's kicking you in the shins.

Margaret Klenck: I don't think that's what the precept is. I think Freud's misunderstanding the precept.

Winifred Gallagher: I think in my own life, if I can manage to love my neighbor as myself, meaning even just to give the benefit of the doubt to the stranger, it's an act of the will. Each time you have to decide to give the benefit of the doubt.

Michael Shermer: At the beginning. But what if they do it again and again?

Louis Massiah: I agree with Winifred. Not even going to Christianity, there's a certain pragmatism, I think, about loving your neighbor that actually you see in Martin Luther King — in that if you are able to love even those that oppress you and you really remain conscious that we are all part of a community, that's how we go forward,

Michael Shermer: That's a strategy, not a feeling.

Louis Massiah: It's a strategy and a feeling — but ultimately that gets you much further than sort of an oppositional stance that, okay we're at war.

Doug Holladay: The feeling's irrelevant. I think the reason you do this is that it changes the whole power equation. Martin Luther King used the principles of loving your enemy and it changes everything. For example, in the first century, Roman citizens could call upon Jews to carry their luggage one mile. It was required by law, and the Jews hated it. After one mile they would drop the baggage and go on. So
Jesus says we can change this power equation. He said go the second mile. The idea in the second mile was, who's in charge now? I think the power now has shifted to the one that was powerless.

Jeremy Fraiberg: I find this a bit confusing. What relevance is this to the spiritual-secular debate?

Doug Holladay: I would say the difference it makes is in our worldview. I need a worldview that embraces the complex kind of ways I need to relate to life. I am going to face people that harm me that are my enemies, how do I deal with that? When, when somebody screws you in business, you have a choice, you know, kill the guy, you know, get bitter, all that stuff. Or you can choose to say, "be smart, but also forgive the person..."

Jeremy Fraiberg: Can't you do that without God?

Doug Holladay: Well, maybe you can, but I'm having a hard enough time doing it with God. Of course you can roll over and be a doormat, but I think it's so contrary to human nature to say "I'm going to forgive that person" and see them for what they could be and pray them into it, believe into it, treat them as they could become when you harm me or harm my child or my wife. And I think part of this idea of loving your enemy is saying "there's a better side of you, there's a image of God that's stamped on you and I want to, I want to believe you into that." And I think that's where the spiritual worldview is hugely ...

Armand Nicholi: Well, I think Jeremy has asked a [good] question. "How is this related to the spiritual worldview?" We need to understand that both in the Hebrew scriptures and in the New Testament: "Thou shalt love the lord thy God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself." Now if a person embraces this worldview, then that becomes the central organizing principle of their lives.

Now it's difficult, as Michael said, your first reaction is "This is kind of stupid, you know, love your neighbor as yourself, it doesn't make sense." But Lewis tries to shed light on that. He makes a very clear distinction that this kind of love, this that's the Greek word "AGAPE," has to do more with the will than feeling. There's something revolutionary about this concept.

Michael Shermer: I think this came from the question, does it come from God or does it come naturally? So at dinner the other night, I'm eating alone in a city where I don't live, and I tip the waiter. Why? I could, I don't have to. I'll never see the person again. There's nobody to impress, I'm alone. Because it makes me feel better.

Doug Holladay: God's watching.

Michael Shermer: He might be, but I'm not worried about that. But why does it make me feel better? So I've been thinking about this. Why would it make me feel better? And the answer is that in our long evolutionary history of living with a small community of other people, it's not enough to just fake being a cooperator and a good person because it's hard to do and people will find you out. You actually have to be a good person. And you're more likely to believe it yourself if you actually do it.
And then you're more likely to do it if you actually believe it yourself. And I think, over the long eons of our evolutionary history, we evolved a moral sense, an empathy, or a feeling of warmth about doing the right thing, not as a fake thing, but as a real thing.