

Love Your Enemies

It is hard to think of a single national crisis in America's entire history that has shaken the nation as suddenly and profoundly as the terrorist attacks upon New York and Washington on Sept. 11. The president has teared up in public, grizzled TV anchors have wept on camera, and any ordinary journalist who isn't comatose grasps that something quite epochal has occurred in the nation's psyche.

The way we now look at reality has been altered beyond recognition. In a recent issue of Time, veteran essayist Roger Rosenblatt wrote that one good thing from the tragedy is that "the chattering classes"—America's cynical and irony-obsessed intelligentsia—finally have been forced to face something they can't giggle or smirk at: real evil.

The apostle Paul made all this clear in a way Christians have seldom doubted in the last two millennia. Our struggle, he said, is not against mere flesh-and-blood adversaries but against the truly wicked spiritual puppet masters behind the scenes: "Against the [spiritual] rulers, against the [spiritual] authorities, against the [spiritual] powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (see Eph. 6:10-18).

Every Christian who has ever lived a life with a modicum of godliness has quickly found this out. A lot of non-Christian people also have sensed it intuitively, and perhaps millions of Americans grasped the concept for the first time on Sept. 11.

You don't have to be a Christian to accept that what the

terrorist fanatics attempted in their hijackings and bombings Sept. 11 was so wicked it was truly demonic. But you do have to be a Christian to understand what to do with that knowledge. The Christian model for dealing with evil involves more than merely putting on the full spiritual armor of God—vital though this is.

At one ordinary human level, a response involves striking back at the terrorists with all of the military power needed to eliminate them as a danger to us or anyone else. This reflects the overwhelming Christian consensus since Augustine (354-430), that God has instituted governments to protect the innocent, deter aggression and implement justice.

But at the level of the Christian inner attitude required of us toward these terrorist monsters who have savaged us so grievously, the commandment of Jesus Christ is painfully clear and utterly radical. “‘But I say to you,’” Jesus says, “‘Love your pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven,’” (Matt. 5:44-45, NKJV). Paul, moreover, tells us not to repay evil with evil, not to take revenge and actually to “overcome evil with good” (see Rom. 12:17-21).

That’s a tall order, even with God’s huge grace. But it is surely the one most likely to prevent our own government-led retribution against the terrorists from igniting an endless firestorm of attack and retaliation between the West and the world of Islam. Of course we should pursue these terrorists, but let’s leave plenty of room for the miraculous working of God’s power.

In our church in Centreville, Va., one prayer warrior said she felt urgently led to call upon Christians all over the world

to pray for God's Holy Spirit (nothing less) to penetrate the hearts of these evil people. God wasn't asking for sentimentality or false empathy for them, she believed. He wanted Christians to so storm heaven in prayer that the thick carapace of evil surrounding the evildoers would be broken through for good.

Before that happens, there are plentiful new opportunities for Christian witness. We have a responsibility as witnesses of Christ to reach out to America's Muslims with the gospel of love and salvation in a way that they might never have been willing to receive before these terrifying recent events.

Islam denies all of the Christian truths. But, then, in the first century so did that arch-persecutor of Christians, Saul, before the Holy Spirit transformed him into the much-loved apostle Paul.