

Don't Call It Love: Justice, Humility, and Benevolent Sexism

Elizabeth Lewis Hall, Ph.D.

Introduction: Sometimes love injures the loved one. In this article, Dr. Liz Hall discusses the roles of reason, justice, and humility in loving others, and applies this to the area of gender relations. She argues that benevolent sexism hurts women, and suggests several pathways for making progress.

C.S. Lewis tells of the case of Mrs. Fidget in his book “The Four Loves.” Mrs. Fidget, according to C.S. Lewis, “lived for her family.” She spent all of her time serving her family – cooking, cleaning, sewing, generally taking care of them. She worked her fingers to the bone for her family.

The effects of her love were not clear until her death. After her death Lewis reports that the drawn look disappeared from her husband’s face; he learned to laugh. Her younger son improved dramatically in his character. Her older son who had avoided being at home all of a sudden spent lots of time contributing to the family’s well-being. The daughter who had always been delicate all of a sudden found that she passionately enjoyed vigorous outdoor activities. Mrs. Fidget lived for her family and her family felt the consequences. Now mothers are not, of course, the only perpetrators of this kind of love. There are many kinds of love and some more obvious than others that benefit the lover more than they benefit the loved one. In fact, they may even harm the loved one.

As a clinical psychologist I’ve observed spouses and parents interacting with a beloved child or husband or wife in ways that were clearly motivated by love, but with damaging effects. Consider, for example, the family member who enables the addict, keeping the individual from experiencing the consequences of his or her addiction, and in that way actually perpetuating the addiction. Or consider the loving parent who desires to keep the child from experiencing any kind of negative emotions and consequently stunts the child’s ability to grow up and handle the realities of living in our real world. If we are honest with ourselves, we may recognize that we intentionally or unintentionally also love others in this way sometimes. Loving well, as you’ve probably realized by this point, can be really complicated. And so, for this reason it makes sense that theologians and philosophers have wrestled to understand and define love for centuries.

One of them, Tom Oord, after investigating all of this great body of literature, ended up offering the following definition. He wrote, “To love is to act intentionally in sympathetic response to others, including God, to promote well-being.” This definition captures several important aspects of love. It is action oriented, so it’s not limited to a loving feeling, but includes behaviors toward the loved one. Secondly, it also does not miss the internal

feeling state or emotion or a feeling with the other person. And finally, this definition includes the intention of promoting the well-being of the loved one. We might call this aspect of love benevolence, the desire to see the loved one flourish.

But it seems to me that love is even more complex than this definition would imply. The Mrs. Fidgets of this world would actually meet the criteria for this particular definition of love. After all, Mrs. Fidget performed actions on the behalf of her family, she had an internal emotional state that motivated her actions, and she really did intend the well-being of her family. But she failed dismally at loving well.

Love requires more of us than action, affection, and benevolence. And here again C.S. Lewis, I think, prompts us in ways that help us to understand better what is required of us. In commenting on Mrs. Fidget's failings he says, "You need 'common sense,' that is, reason. You need 'give and take,' that is, you need justice...[and] you need 'decency.' There is no disguising the fact that this means goodness, patience, self-denial, humility, and the continual intervention of a far higher sort of love than affection, in itself, can ever be." Reason, justice, and goodness. These are important. We can use our reason to evaluate the effects of our loving actions and determine if our benevolent intentions actually do result in good or if they result in harm.

Loving with reason takes into account the actual consequences of our loving actions. Goodness, as Lewis points out, involves humility, and humility means acknowledging that we don't always know how to love well. It involves owning that the ways that we love are so often deficient. Loving with humility means letting down our defenses and acknowledging that we may be in need of correction – justice – in love, this third element that CS Lewis highlights. It's a theme the Christian philosopher Nick Wolterstorff has reflected on extensively. I'd like to unpack a little bit what he has to say about this.

Wolterstorff tells about an eye opening experience he had in South Africa in a dialogue that he witnessed between Afrikaners and black and coloreds. The black and colored spoke angrily of their experiences of being humiliated and demeaned, and they asked for justice. In response, the Afrikaners did not argue that apartheid was just. Instead, they insisted that justice was not relevant to the discussion, that the relevant category was love, charity, benevolence.

In other words, they saw their actions as being characterized by charity, by the protection of the blacks and coloreds in their country. They were puzzled when the expected gratitude was not forthcoming. Wolterstorff says, "After witnessing this exchange, scales fell off my eyes. What I saw as I had never seen before was benevolence being used as an instrument of oppression."

The problem he identified is that this benevolence had a paternalistic flavor to it. Now, what is paternalism? Again, to quote Wolterstorff, "Paternalism consists of bestowing on someone, without any decision on his part, that which one regards as enhancing his good,

regardless of his views on the matter if any,” or “putting pressure on someone to decide to act in a way that one regards as good or right, or to decide to refrain from acting in a way that one regards as bad or wrong, when one believes that the person himself is not inclined so to act or refrain from acting.”

Now if you think about it, benevolent paternalism is actually sometimes appropriate. When the loved one is not capable of making good choices for him or herself, we have to step in and act that way. So, for example, with small children when they want to eat all of their Halloween candy in one day, or when they want to stay up half the night on a school night. These are situations where it’s appropriate to step in and act in this paternalistic way.

But when people are, in fact, capable of self-determination, benevolent paternalism is a problem. In Wolterstorff’s words, “it does not pay the loved one due respect as a rational moral agent.” It treats him or her as an inferior moral agent. It is disrespectful; it does not give people what is due them. It is lacking in justice. So justice is, I think, clearly another important component of loving others well, because loving with justice does not undermine the autonomy of the loved one.

So, once again I say that loving well can be really complicated. Sometimes our deficient loving comes not from our personal inadequacies, but because we’re socialized into certain patterns of interactions that end up being harmful to others. These patterns form the norms of our relationships. They might have societal support, customs, or manners that are built around them. Apartheid would be an example of this. But here I’d like to focus on patterns of lovingly inflicted harm that are quite common. Those of benevolent sexism.

Benevolent sexism is a form of sexism that is experienced by the perpetrator of the sexism as subjectively benevolent. In other words, the intent is often loving, aimed at the well-being of the woman in question. The problem is that those behaviors that are motivated by this kind of sexism do in fact lead to harm. So what kinds of behaviors might we include in this category of benevolent sexism? There are actually three different kinds of benevolent sexism.

Behaviors that are based on the characterization of women as needing to be protected and supported and shielded from unpleasantness, that see women perhaps as wonderful but childlike, is one kind of benevolent sexism. What might be some examples of this?

Maybe swooping in to get the suitcase she’s carrying when actually she’s capable of carrying it herself. And by the way, if the suitcase actually is too heavy for her and you happen to be physically stronger, by all means ask her permission, and then take the suitcase. How about stepping in to defend her when she can actually stand up for herself? Or taking on the additional responsibility so she doesn’t have to concern herself? Deciding not to tell her the unpleasant news so that she won’t worry. Making the decision for her because you know what’s best for her. Telling her what to do, rather than supporting her and

working out her own solutions to problems. These are all examples of this first kind of benevolence sexism.

A second category of behaviors communicates the view that women have certain unique qualities, especially domestic ones, that make them better suited than men for certain tasks and roles, especially those that have little status and power. So women are perceived as being nurturing and helpful and warm, and consequently women are thought of primarily as wives and mothers. What might this look like on the ground?

Well, how about talking to male colleagues about work projects and hobbies, but to female colleagues about their home and children? In a mixed group, assuming that a woman will do any caregiving tasks like getting coffee or providing snacks. When asked to identify potential candidates for a task with status, only being able to think of men.

A third category of benevolent sexism sees women primarily in terms of their roles as romantic and sexual partners to men. And this often goes along with an overemphasis on appearance. So what many of us have witnessed in the last few months, focusing on the wardrobe or hairstyles of women politicians rather than on their political ideology. Calling a woman who is not your romantic partner sweetheart or darling or honey. And perhaps most common, complimenting a woman who is not your romantic partner on her appearance.

At least some of these examples might have struck you as things that you see as rather innocuous, benign, maybe even helpful or flattering or kind in some way. Are they? Well, unfortunately, no. A number of recent studies have begun to document the unintended negative consequences of these kinds of interactions, leading to the conclusion that these forms of benevolent sexism undermine women's independence and autonomy and competence. In other words, they are unjust.

For example, in these studies the experimenters might expose women to benevolently sexist interactions. They might ask a woman to carry a box from one room to another, and then have a confederate, a male confederate, come into the room and say, "Oh, I'll take that for you," and take the box out of her hands and take it to the other room. A very small interaction, right? A very small thing. Or they might give her a challenging task to do and then have a man offer to give her help and guidance because she is a woman and would probably need that.

Or in a study that might even be more surprising to you, the only intervention was to tell one group of women that women were more cultured and sophisticated than men. That sounds pretty good, huh? The problem is that in comparison to a group that were not told this, these women underperformed on a test of working memory in comparison to the women who were not treated in this benevolently sexist way.

There have been lots of studies that have been done in this area, so let me just tell you about some of the consequences that they have discovered. Benevolent sexism produces

self-doubt about competence and decreased self-esteem. It lowers women's performance on cognitive tasks. It causes them to define their worth on gender stereotypical traits rather than on their own actual abilities, and makes them less likely to protect themselves and to speak out against injustices. It increases their perspective on themselves as being sexual objects and it heightens their shame about their bodies. In other words, benevolent sexism undermines women's competence, fostering feelings of helplessness and contributing to their victimization.

The call to love others is central to a life of following Christ. We all know that loving our enemies is difficult. We all struggle with that, but it turns out that loving those who are not our enemies and even those that are easy to love is also difficult, challenging, complex. It's not enough to desire good things for others. It's not even enough to do what is in our power to achieve those desired outcomes. We also need reason and goodness and justice in discerning whether what we do for them actually will lead to good things for them.

Since I'm a psychologist who studies women's issues, my two teenage sons have often been subjected to my thoughts about these gender related concerns. So the other day this concept of benevolent sexism happened to come up and we had a little bit of a dialogue about it. In response, my son presented a scenario.

At the Christian summer camp that he attends every year, when the church bus pulls into camp the youth leader instructs the boys to take the girls' suitcases up the long hill to the girls' cabin before taking care of their own gear. My son was being socialized by his youth leader into how to be a loving young Christian man, but the research we were discussing was calling into question this vision for loving that he was being given. So he asked me, "What should I do?"

This scenario really helps to illustrate some of the difficulties we face in changing how we love each other as men and women. My son would face disapproval from his peers if he refused to engage in a suitcase carrying. He would also miss out on the benefits to himself of being perceived as a gentleman and the good feelings of seeing himself as being virtuous and helpful.

Here's another issue that comes up. The girls in this scenario, at least some of them, probably liked having their suitcases carried up to their cabin. It feels good to be taken care of and treasured and protected. This is one of the most ironic aspects of benevolent sexism — that at least some women like it. Being put on a pedestal is flattering even if the cost is that you can't really do much when you're perched up on top of a pedestal.

So, what I want you to notice is that benevolent sexism is not a problem because it offends some women. That's not the issue. Benevolent sexism is not a problem because some women might feel patronized. That is not the major problem with it. It's problematic because it produces negative effects. It goes against the well-being of the women.

So, feeling good cannot be our criteria. It cannot be the sole criteria for our loving others well. Our children feel good when they eat junk food and stay up late and when they get the new toy whenever they want it. Drug addicts feel good momentarily when they get their drug, don't they?

There's another important point that's illustrated by this scenario. Benevolent sexism is not something that we can characterize as something that men do to women. It's something that everyone participates in. Benevolent sexism is a dance in which both men and women have active parts, and because our ways of interacting with each other as men and women have been ingrained in us from an early age, they just feel right.

It may be that some of you are actually really uncomfortable with what I'm saying. Maybe even a little upset, mad. That makes sense because what I'm doing is challenging your view of reality, the way that things are, the way things are supposed to be. You've known this since you were a child. This is upsetting. And so I think this is where humility kicks in. What if your way of doing things, the way you've always done things, is not the most loving way? Are you, in fact, open to the possibility that you've been wrong?

Up to this point we have been talking about benevolent sexism at the individual level, in terms of specific interactions between men and women. For just a few moments I'd like to pull the lens out wider and point out the implications of benevolent sexism for institutions and cultures. In other words, benevolent sexism is also relevant to politics. Benevolently sexist attitudes are correlated with greater acceptance of violence against women and with greater acceptance of discrimination. In fact, cross-national studies have shown that levels of benevolent sexism are positively correlated with United Nations indicators of gender inequality that measure things such as level of education and longevity. So in other words, the greater the benevolent sexism that's endorsed at a national level, the greater the gender inequality in that country.

These benevolently sexist ways of interacting seem, in fact, to be mechanisms that maintain gender inequality as women are being rewarded basically for being the right kind of women. In fact, benevolent sexism turns out to be related to hostile sexism, that type of antagonism toward women that we all clearly know is not okay. It's certainly not popular in our Christian circles to argue that women are inferior to men, or that women who are sexually assaulted probably did something to deserve it, or to find excuses for violence against women. But research shows that both individual and national level benevolent sexism and hostile sexism are positively correlated with each other. So while at face value they may seem to be quite different and in fact opposites of each other, in reality they are two sides of the same coin. Women are rewarded benevolently for being the right kind of women and are punished through hostile sexism for being the wrong kind of women.

This interconnectedness between benevolent and hostile sexism helps us, I think, understand more clearly the dark side of benevolent sexism. And so, learning new ways of

interacting goes beyond just learning to love each other individually toward pursuing the goal of creating societies that are more just.

How can we move forward in pursuing justice and loving women well? There are no easy answers when patterns of interaction are so deeply embedded in social norms. It really takes more than good intentions to find a way out. Look at how long it's been taking to dismantle completely apartheid. But there are a few things that can be done.

For you men out there, don't just assume that you know how to love well. Cultivate empathy so you can discern how your benevolent intentions actually play out in the lives of the women that you love well. Question socially sanctioned ways of loving well; become more aware. Start noticing the patterns in yourself and in others. Malformed love needs to be recognized before it can be challenged. And when you do catch yourself acting paternalistically, do something different. Take the time to reinforce the competence and autonomy of the women with whom you interact. Ask permission to help. Support the decisions that women make. Have high expectations of the women in your life. Ask what she would like you to do instead of assuming that you know already. Be willing to defy social expectations. Explain why you are doing or not doing certain things.

How about you women? Also become more aware. Start noticing the patterns in yourself and others. Take responsibility for your decisions. Don't default to letting others decide for you. Speak up when it would be easier to keep quiet. Carry your own burdens, literally and metaphorically. Only accept help when you can't actually do it yourself. Be willing to defy social expectations. Explain why you are doing or not doing certain things.

For both men and women, don't expect it to be easy. After all, we are swimming upstream. And know that even if you're not loving perfectly, you are loving better. And isn't that what life is all about? To learn to love God as God loved us.

Let me conclude with a challenge from William Wilberforce who said in the context of revealing the horrors of slavery, "Having heard all of this you may choose to look the other way, but you can never again say that you did not know."

So let us know and love reasonably, humbly, and justly.

Elizabeth Lewis Hall, Ph.D., is Professor of Psychology at Rosemead School of Psychology, where she teaches clinical and integration courses. In addition to teaching, she maintains a small clinical practice. Her empirical research focuses on women's issues in the evangelical subculture and on the application of clinical psychology in the context of missions. She is also committed to the practice and teaching of the integration of psychology and theology, and most recently has been integratively examining the meaning of having bodies and topic of suffering. In addition to publications in evangelical journals

such as the *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, and *Christian Scholars Review*, she has contributed a Christian voice in secular venues such as *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, *Sex Roles*, and *Psychology of Women Quarterly*. She has been a member of the Narramore Christian Foundation Board of Directors since 1999.

This article, © June 15, 2017, is used with permission of the Center for Christian Thought, Biola University, October 2, 2024.

Unique Ministries of the Narramore Christian Foundation

- MK ReEntry Seminar, a program for young adult children of missionaries return to North America to attend university or other pursuits
- PhD in Clinical Christian Counseling program near Manila, Philippines
- Counseling & Member Care Seminar, a program of training and lay counseling for missionary member care providers and others in ministry
- Christian counselor and psychologist referrals in the U.S. and globally
- Consultations with mission leaders
- Booklets on various problems and life challenges

The Narramore Christian Foundation is a non-profit, biblically-based organization that serves individuals and families through various worldwide ministries. Would you like to become a financial partner with us? Contributions are tax deductible in the U.S.

To make online credit card donations, please visit <http://ncfliving.org/get-involved/donate.html>.

If you prefer to send a check, please mail it to:

Narramore Christian Foundation
P.O. Box 661900
Arcadia, CA 91066 – 1900
Phone: (626) 821-8400
Email: ncf@ncfliving.org
Website: www.ncfliving.org