

## The myth of unconditional love (Michael Bressemer, Ph.D.)

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Many believe that “love conquers all” and they erroneously attribute the Holy Bible as teaching this. However, the saying is from the Roman poet Virgil (“omnia vincit amor,” Eclogue X) rather than from Scripture. Although love is able to cover wrongs and a multitude of sins (Proverbs 10:13; 1 Peter 4:8), to state “love conquers all” is to make love irresistible. Unfortunately, we know there are people who refuse to submit to the love of God (John 5:42-43). Love may be unyielding, and unquenchable in the one who has love (Song of Songs 8:6-7), but that doesn’t mean love can win over those who don’t want to receive it.

Another myth is the idea if we love someone then we should never do anything to hurt him or her. Although love is patient, kind, courteous, and forgiving (1 Corinthians 13:4-5), love still offends on occasion (e.g., Christ's rebuke to Peter, Mark 8:33). A loving Christian is not always warm and sweet; a loving Christian admonishes, corrects, and rebukes (Colossians 3:16; 2 Timothy 4:2). Often we know the love of God by the painful trial we are presently enduring than how comfortable our lives are (Hebrews 12:5-11).

However, the greatest popular myth permeating Christendom is the false idea that love should be unconditional. Somewhere every Sunday, there is a Protestant minister proclaiming from the pulpit that we should be loving our spouse, our children, and our neighbor unconditionally, because God loves us unconditionally. Yet try as you might, you will not find the word "unconditional" within any of the books of the Bible, nor will you find the concept of "unconditional love" within the writings of the Church Fathers. The problem is not just that unconditional love is a teaching alien to our Christian Tradition, but the concept is potentially destructive to our relationship with God and humanity. To love unconditionally is irresponsible. To love unconditionally cheapens what it means to be in a caring relationship. To love unconditionally is to fail to love fully, and sincere love should never fail (1 Corinthians 13:8).

To explain why the myth of unconditional love is so dangerous, it will be necessary to differentiate unconditional love from three principles which are true of Biblical love: unmerited love, covenant love, and charitable love.

### **Unmerited Love**

Many Christians mistakenly think unconditional love is synonymous with unmerited love. It is true God loves us first (1 John 4:19) and that we did nothing to "merit" (earn or deserve) God's love (Ephesians 2:8-9); however once the gift of love is extended, it is incumbent upon us to receive the gift and abide in it. By analogy, good parents love their child before she is born, and they will continue to love her after birth though their daughter has done nothing to earn that gift. Yet as the child is raised, she will need to abide in that love by doing her part in maintaining and developing the relationship. Similarly, we are commanded to remain in God's love (John 15:9-10) and to grow in love (2 Peter 3:18).

Protestant Christians want to separate the act of God giving us the gift of love (i.e., Christ's justifying atonement for us) from the relationship we have with God (i.e., working out our sanctification)—supposedly the former being unconditional while

the later is conditional. However if you consider this from the parenting analogy, conceiving a child and raising a child are not two totally separate processes which can be divided from one another (despite abortionist thinking to the contrary!). Even before the child is delivered, as the parents are discussing their hopes and dreams for their child, there is a desired outcome—a conditional expectation—placed on the relationship: that the child would positively respond to the love offered her and grow to becoming a responsible adult. Otherwise, the whole purpose of having children would be capricious. Similarly, it would be a mistake to separate our “new birth” in God (1 Peter 1:23-25) from needing to “grow up in our salvation” (1 Peter 2:1-3). God lovingly had a plan and a purpose for us before our physical conception (Romans 8:28-30).

It is true love is persistent (1 Corinthians 13:7) and should extend even to those who do not love us back (Luke 6:27-36), yet every time love is given there is something desired or hoped for in return: for the person to abide in and grow in that love. For God to love unconditionally is tantamount to Him saying, “I’m going to love you, but I don’t care whether you continue in a relationship with Me or not. I don’t care what you do with the gift I give you.” This apathy would be contrary to what it means to love and it would also be dangerous. To give someone something so precious and not care whether the person developed that gift is to spoil the person and permit her to be irresponsible (e.g., the Parable of the Talents, Matthew 25:14-30). The parent who gives their child whatever is asked for, and then wants nothing to result from that generosity, is not really loving their child but setting her up to be a dependent and immature brat. To love and not want something of the beloved, *for the beloved’s own good*, is a contradiction. “Unconditional love” is an oxymoron because love always hopes (1 Corinthians 13:7).

A beautiful Biblical example of love being conditional is Christ's relationship with the Apostle Peter. When Peter denied Christ three times before the rooster crowed, Peter failed to abide in a love that was consistently faithful to his Lord (Matthew 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:55-62; John 18:16-18, 25-27). Yet, Jesus still extends His love toward Peter, though not freely—not unconditionally. Jesus later asks Peter three times, "Do you truly love me?" When Peter responds, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you," Jesus thrice commands Peter to "Feed my sheep" and additionally admonishes Peter to "Follow me!" (John 21:15-19). Jesus doesn't reinstate His relationship with Peter by saying, "Ah, it's okay Peter that you denied me three times; I love you anyway. I know you have been through a lot being my disciple, so I won't ask anything more from you. Have a nice life, Peter." Hopefully, you see the absurdity of this; yet it is exactly this type of watered-down "love" that is being advocated for by well-intentioned but misinformed Christians.

## **Covenant Love**

Throughout Scripture God makes covenants with His people. These covenants are either promises or agreements between God and mankind. Many Protestant theologians tend to categorize these covenants as either conditional or unconditional. For example, in the "Noahic Covenant" God promises to not again destroy almost all of earthly life by flood; the seal of that covenant is the rainbow (Genesis 9:8-17). This promise is viewed by some as being "unconditional:" nothing is seemingly asked of mankind for God to keep this promise. An example of a conditional covenant is the "Sinai Covenant" where there is an agreement that God will protect and promote Israel's destiny as long as Israel obeys God's commandments (Exodus 19-24). Scholars debate the number of these covenants within the Bible, but other commonly held examples are: the Adamic Covenant (Genesis 1:28; 2:15-16; 3:15-19), the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 15:9-21; 17), the Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 7:5-16); and the New Testament Covenant (Matthew 16:18; 26:28; Luke 22:20; Titus 1:1-2; Hebrews 13:20-21). Being that some of these covenants appear unconditional (i.e., are not in the form of an "if. . . , then. . ." type of clause), is this proof God has unconditional love for us?

Dividing Scripture into discreet covenant periods is a modern and questionable theological interposition—something not done by the Orthodox Church. Being we are created by God and He is Sovereign over us, the only real covenant is we acknowledge and abide by the rules of that relationship: we are to have faith in God and conform our lives to His commands. This basic covenant underlies all Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. It is true God's plan for bringing His people into a more mature relationship with Him has unfolded over history (Ephesians 3:4-

5); however, it is not true there are completely separate covenant time periods where God despairing says, “Darn, the old agreement is no longer working, so let’s make a new agreement and start the relationship all over again.”

So what do we make of the various promises and agreements found at different historical periods within Scripture? Only that they are natural occurrences within any developing relationship. Returning to our analogy, there is only one overriding covenant between parents and their child and that is they fulfill their roles: the parents provide resources, opportunities, and guidance; the child receives these gifts and develops them toward becoming a responsible adult. However, as the child is raised all sorts of auxiliary promises and agreements may be made according to what the parents deem best for their daughter as she matures. At times the parents may make “conditional” deals like, “If you wash the dishes then I’ll give you an allowance.” At other times the parents may grant their daughter an unmerited (seemingly unconditional) boon and promise to buy her an ice cream cone. Yet underlying all these supplementary agreements and promises—these minor “covenants”—is the major covenant of the relationship between parent and child: this relational covenant is such that parents always have hopes, desires, and expectations for their daughter. The parents do not give unconditionally, but rather they want their daughter to grow-up and become mature. God asks the same of us: that we grow-up and become mature (Matthew 5:48; Ephesians 4:7, 5:1-2; Hebrews 5:12-6:1; 2 Peter 3:18; Jude 20; etc).

Some Protestants argue that God needs nothing from us for His well-being. Similarly, it is asserted that true parental love for a child is unconditional because the parents need nothing from their daughter; the parents can take care of themselves independently from their child. While it is true an omnipotent, self-sufficient, eternally perfect God *needs* nothing from us, yet God still *desires* something from us. And, while it is also true what God desires for us is for our own good, it is still a relationship based upon a Lord imposing His will on a vassal, and we are punished or rewarded depending on whether we do what our Liege wants (e.g., Matthew 25:31-46). In reality a child still has to do the work of pleasing her parents, and in the same way we have to do the work of pleasing God (2 Corinthians 5:9; Galatians 6:8; Colossians 1:10; 1 Thessalonians 2:4; etc). Keep in mind “unconditional” means without anything asked for in return, and even a casual reading from Scripture will testify to the fact God asks a lot from us to be in a covenant relationship with Him, including possible martyrdom (Mark 8:34-38); otherwise His love would be a cheap, inconsequential thing.

It is additionally argued by Protestants a good parent will love their child no matter

if the child meets the parent's every expectation or not; similarly, God will continue to love us whether we fulfill all His commandments or not—hence, the love given is seemingly unconditional. Saint Paul's declaration to the Romans is seen as a proof text for unconditional love:

"I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

St Paul is correct in asserting there is nothing that can undo God's love for us, but we can still place ourselves in a position to make His love ineffectual. A daughter may run away from home and thus separate herself from the benefits of being in a covenant relationship with her parents (e.g., The Prodigal Child, Luke 15:11-32). In the same way, we can alienate ourselves from God (Colossians 1:21) though God will never choose to unlovingly alienate Himself from us. Note, as soon as the defiant daughter returns to her parents, the *conditions* inherent in the roles of being a parent and a child will return to the relationship.

## **Charitable Love**

Another commonly made error is to assert charitable love as equivalent to unconditional love. It is easy to see how this false conclusion may be drawn from selected verses within Scripture. For example, Our Lord stated, "If you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that." Rather we should, "lend to them without expecting to get *anything* back" (Luke 6:32-36, emphasis added). Christ also taught, "When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" (Matthew 6:3), which is to say we should not give with one hand expecting to be repaid in the other. St. Paul also affirmed love is "not self-seeking" (1 Corinthians 13:5). So if we give without asking to get something back isn't that unconditional love?

The problem with associating charitable love with unconditional love is not asserting we want *nothing in return*, but rather asserting we do not want *something positive to happen* from the gift we give. When we give to a charitable organization, we don't want the charity to repay us as if our gift was a loan; however, we do expect the charity to put our gift to good use. We want what we give to bear fruit: lessen starvation, injustice, poverty, disease, etc. If the charity squandered our money on a junket to Hawaii, then it would be foolish to continue to invest in that charity. So in fact, there is a condition to being charitable: the charity must be responsible with the funds or resources it receives. It is no different than

God's investment in us: if we do not bear fruit as disciples of Christ, then we are "picked up, thrown into the fire and burned" (John 15:5-6). In order to be a branch on the "true vine" and bear fruit, God expects us to remain in Christ, remain in his love, and obey His commandments (John 15:1-17).

An example of the conditional aspect of charitable love is found within the Sermon on the Mount. Earlier in the sermon, Christ stated we should be so charitable as to turn our cheek if we are struck, to give our cloak as well as our tunic, to go two miles if we are asked to go one, and to not turn away anyone who wants to borrow from us (Matthew 5:38-42)—all of which seems to be unconditional. However, later in the same sermon Jesus instructed,

"Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces" (Matthew 7:6).

So how do we reconcile the earlier verses of giving freely with the later verses of not giving to those undeserving of our precious gifts? Initially, we should invest in others in hope that our witness will lead to their submission to Our Lord. When making such an investment, we should be extraordinarily generous (1 Timothy 6:18) as God is exceedingly generous to us (2 Corinthians 9:6-15; Titus 3:5-6; James 1:5). However, if after we have given generously nothing positive happens, then we should "shake the dust off our feet" and move on toward giving our good gifts to those who may be more responsive to them (Matthew 10:11-15). In other words, our generosity has the condition that it would bear a beneficial result, if not then we should charitably invest somewhere else.

## **Love and Responsibility**

In summary, the concept of unconditional love is a myth because the cost of love is the work of being responsible (1 Corinthians 7:23-24). We are commanded by God to abide in His love and strive toward becoming more virtuous. We cannot divorce love from the *condition* of responsibility without destroying the very definition of love.

"Thus we can see both that love for God is begotten from the virtues and that the virtues are born of love. For this reason the Lord said at one point in the Gospel, 'He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves me' (John 14:21), and at another point, 'He who loves Me will keep My commandments (John 14:23). But without love the works of virtue are not praiseworthy or profitable to the man who practices them, and the same is true of love without works. St Paul makes this fully clear with reference to works when we writes to the Corinthians, 'If

I do this and that, but have no love, it profits me nothing' (1 Corinthians 13:1-3); and with reference to love the disciple especially beloved by Christ writes, "Let us not love in word or tongue but in action and truth' (1 John 3:18)." — St Gregory Palamas

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